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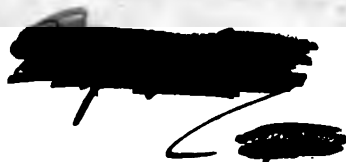
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PRUE

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IMPRUDENT PRUE





IMPRUDENT PRUE

A PHANTASMAGORY

BY
ADAM ASCUE

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IMPRUDENT PRUE

I

"My Dear," said Mrs. Inkersley, "you really *must* eat something."

"Eat!" groaned the husband. "Eat! with the thermometer at ninety in the shade! Eat!"

"Try this lettuce; it is really beautiful; and so cool."

"Take it away. I'm not a guinea-pig!"

"Another cup of tea, then?"

"Of molten lead, you mean!"

"But, Herbert, you *must* take some food. You will get into a low state."

"Food for the mind is best. Leave me alone, Clara."

Wrinkles of impatience moved like congealing fluid over his tall brow as he withdrew, or feigned to withdraw, into a *Fortnightly Review*, and the pamphlet jerked in the long knotty hand that held it. It was a perplexing physiognomy; enduring, yet restless; truthful, yet secretive; cynical, and at the same time mystical. He was a man of fifty or more; lank haired, shabby in attire, slouching in attitude. And withal

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there was distinction in his person, and fascination in his large hazel eyes.

"This heat will be the death of father!" piped little Hamlet disconcertingly.

Eight children edged a table comfortable with potted meat, fruit, green-stuff, bread-and-jam. Hamlet, the baby of the family, and the only boy in the batch, had reached the period of sticky repletion, and apparently considered that the moment for reassertion of his personality coincided therewith.

"Hush, my pet; father is a little worried!" murmured Mrs. Inkersley from her end of the board.

"You are much too forward, Hamlet!" said Prudence, the eldest daughter, whose position as acting-governess entitled her to administer rebuke.

"So are you!" retorted Hamlet.

"You think because it is holiday time that you can behave exactly as you please," said Prudence severely. "You should speak when you are spoken to."

"And you shouldn't speak at all!"

To the six other sisters this repartee sounded extremely smart, and they tittered gleefully.

Prudence flushed. She looked very forbidding and very handsome. "Little boys should be seen but not heard," she said.

"Little girls should'nt be seen nor heard!"

responded Hamlet glibly ; and a scream of approbation went up from the six plump rosy sisters, whilst Mr. Inkersley smiled a grim smile in the reflected light of his periodical. Prudence squared her shoulders and bit her lip. It was something of a paradox to call her little. She stood five feet nine inches in her stockings, bore the experience of three-and-twenty summers, and would have made an exceptionally comely young man.

Mrs Inkersley tried to look stern. "Fie, fie, Hamlet!" she said. "You really must *not* be so pert!"

Hamlet simply "made a face" at his mother. She, in youth, must have been lovely. With advancing years she had grown mountainous. An Athenian Venus had been swallowed up in middle-class fatness, and had melted peacefully into her adipose packing. The sunny eyes of the goddess still shone through those now turned on little Hamlet, and her honied smile moistened the lips that tenderly reproved him. Mrs. Inkersley's mouth was jammy, and so were her fat white hands. There was a softness in her features that her friends called "sweet," and a mildness in her manner that her enemies—could she have boasted any—might have found "slatternly". The six younger daughters, all lovely, were

all her living image, even, on the present occasion, to the jammy mouth and fingers. Engaging, always, the love of all, but not commanding, ever, the respect of any, her apologetic blandness in rebuking Hamlet served now to exasperate Prudence.

"The boy is simply getting too spoilt to endure!" she said between her teeth. "He ought to be punished instead of applauded."

"Tut, tut, my love," said the mother; "he didn't mean anything!"

"Oh, of course not! He never does mean anything! He can't do wrong! Just wait till he goes to school! He will soon get the impudence taken out of him then!"

Hamlet began to show symptoms of weeping, and the sister beauties opened six jammy mouths, and lifted up six shrill trebles, in deprecation: "Oh, Prue, don't be a cross-patch!" "Don't be put out over nothing!" "Don't scold poor little Hamlet!" "You'll make him cry!" et cetera.

But the father's smile sat heavy on the soul of Prudence. Her temper was up, and she meant to make it felt.

"Since Mr. Foljambe was sent away," she said, whilst her lips and nostrils quivered, "Hamlet has simply run wild."

"Tut, tut, my child!" said Mrs. Inkersley, telegraphing wildly with sticky

hands and mouth, as who should say, Keep off that dangerous subject, "Tut, tut!"

But Prudence was determined to produce a crisis.

"Mr. Foljambe thoroughly understood him," she persisted. "He kept him in order as no one else could."

"That doesn't say much for yourself, Prudence," interposed the father in threatening tones.

"What is the use of my wasting time over him, if everything I teach him in the school-room is stultified in the parlour? Now Mr. Foljambe—"

"Mr. Foljambe was in many respects a very nice man," hastened the mother in alarm, "and certainly a perfect gentleman, but—"

"I think I have already expressed my desire," broke out Mr. Inkersley, stiffening himself in his chair, "that the name of Mr. Foljambe should not be mentioned in my hearing again."

"Yes, Prudence," urged Mrs. Inkersley in trepidation; "you should bear in mind what your dear father commanded you!"

"Oh, of course!" said Prudence. "Put me in the wrong! I admit I can't do right! I manage the house, and mind the girls, and teach Hamlet, all for nothing, and the only thanks I get is to be sat on all round!"

Her voice was pregnant with indignation,

and foolish bickerings might probably have risen to a general tempest—a phenomenon of rare occurrence in the household, for parents and children really doted upon each other—when a rapid shadow crossed the open windows, passing towards the front door. Silence fell upon all—the jammy mouths, open in expectation, were turned, with one accord, in the direction of the shadow. The mother looked very startled, and Mr. Inkersley, allowing the *Fortnightly Review* to sink slowly to his knees, listened with vague trouble in his eyes. Presently the street-bell struck a tiny note.

“Who *can* it be?” queried Mrs Inkersley, as much as to say, There he is again!

“Who *can* it be?” cheeped Hamlet, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his tunic.

“Who *can* it be?” chorussed the six blondes.

A maid servant (ah, what dignity of destiny may the person of a servant-wench at times acquire!) entered, bearing a salver. “Please, sir,” she said, addressing the master, “some one wants to see you particular.”

“Who is it, Cerulia?” he questioned, in a voice that rose from the cellar and percolated through fine gravel.

“Please, sir, I don’t know; ’e sent this.”

The master took a card from the salver

and examined it on both sides, holding it at a distance, and turning it over with the tips of his fingers. It might have been a slip of blanket from a smallpox hospital.

"Right," he said; he spoke in an absurdly cheerful alto now. "I will come at once."

He upset a teacup, let fall the *Fortnightly Review* and with it the visiting-card, and left the room. Dead silence held the tea-table.

"They had better go," said Prudence at length, indicating the circle of beauties with a movement of her head.

"Yes, they had better go," assented the mother. "Children you have had quite enough to eat. Run out into the park and play."

They filed out, whispering one to another, Hamlet last and chief.

"The Man in Black!" said Mrs. Inkersley in shuddering accents.

"The Man in Black!" echoed Prudence, assuming an air of penitence.

"Your poor, poor father!"

"Yes, poor father!" Very penitently.

"Let us go up to the schoolroom and watch from the window." They rose.

"Look!" cried Prudence, dropping suddenly on her knees. "Here is his card! Now we shall find out who he is!"

"Oh—his card! And all these years I could never learn the wretch's name!"

They drew together, they examined the card on both sides, they turned it over and over, and round and round, and up and down. There was no name, character, or figure. It was blank.

They stared at one another with faces as blank, and with looks of mingled disappointment and dismay. Voracious curiosity had met a cold rebuff.

Together they ascended to the school-room. From its window, up aloft, they set a watch over a dead-and-gone front-garden and a sunset-flooded street.

A hundred years ago the house had been a country residence. Without changing a brick in its façade, a bar in its railings, a branch in its smoke-crusted trees, it was now marching steadily townward; for grimy Grimville was on all sides hemming it in. Where, not so many years before, had been green fields and a few thatched cottages, there were now pink walls and blue roofs. A tapering gin-palace, almost opposite, occupied the site of an ancient half-timbered inn. A steam-tram fizzed and fumed where stage-coaches formerly had plied. The ancient pleasure-grounds of the dwelling had been perverted to a public park where shop-boys loafed, children screeched, and a band played on summer nights. But the house itself remained intact. On quaint urban

plans of a century ago, "Denmark Lodge" appears in copper-plate, isolated by its wooded domain and fronted by its posting-tavern. On the street-map prefixed to recent editions of the Grimvillę Directory it adventures itself lithographically, backed by that vulgar park, and faced by that yet more vulgar "hotel." T'was a rusty link, uniting, architecturally, the new spirit and the old; the florescent barbarism euphemistically described as Civilization, and the defunct civilization we enviously stigmatize as Barbarous.

From those ruins of stateliness mother and daughter pored upon triumphs of progress: fire-brick pavements, macadamized horse-road, slate roofs, ground glass, gas-lamps, a policeman sweltering in white cotton gloves and electro-plated buttons, lime-trees expiring in iron cages. The watchers at the window were thirsting from curiosity, even as the saplings in the street were thirsting from the drought. But nothing appeared.

A few ragged children were shouting at play, bathing themselves like young dolphins in the glow of the evening. A tramcar passed; another; yet another. Impatience magnified seconds to minutes and drew out minutes to ages.

"He must have slipped away as we came upstairs," Mrs. Inkersley at length said in despair.

"No—listen! he is just leaving," answered Prudence. "Hark! the door is opening!"

Holding their breath, they leaned over the window-sill, and peered between the branches of a huge vine that covered the lower front of the house. There were voices below. Then the hall-door was slammed-to. Then a skimpy black figure, topped by a soft felt hat of semi-clerical aspect, skipped jubilantly down the garden path, passed through the wide old gates, and danced rapidly away into the sunset. There was something hateful in its movements. They exhibited at once the agility of youth, the knowingness of age, the wantonness of mischief. Man, monkey, and snake, were together hinted at in uncanny combination.

"Yes, it is he, it is he!" ejaculated Mrs. Inkersley. "He looks more devilish than ever!"

"If only he would die!" suggested Prudence wearily.

"Bad people never die, my love; the good alone are taken. I have been feeling very strange myself, just lately." It was a point in Mrs. Inkersley's pedagogical system to discover in everything calamitous a reason why she herself should receive sympathy.

She spoke now with the lachrymose self-abandonment of a martyr. "Great are the troubles of the righteous," she seemed to say

Hamlet here burst into the room. Prudence snatched him up in her arms, and mumbling words of endearment over him, smothered him with kisses. He suffered them with a complacency which implied that she might consider herself forgiven. The mother wiped her nose (her recognised symbol of tears), and murmured something pathetic as to the sweetness of brotherly love and the need of its continuance. Her emotion mastered, she addressed herself coaxingly to the little boy.

"Did you hear anything, my pet?" she asked in a weepish whisper.

"Yes, did you hear anything, dear?" wheedled Prudence, her arms still around the child.

"Only a bit," answered Hamlet.

"What did you hear, Hammie?"

"I heard the man say, 'I would have kem befowre, but I have been a little indisposed, and I knew you had rawther I kem in parson.'" Through the lips of the boy the man in black spoke unmistakably. Hamlet was a born mimic.

"Indisposed!" exclaimed Mrs. Inkersley. "That accounts for it! The beast was due on midsummer day, but could not come. I was certain there was something preying on Herbert's mind. What a pity the monster got well!"

"You didn't see his face, Hamlet dear?" questioned Prudence.

"No; only his back as he was going away. I was hiding in the coat-press. He sports a lot of hair-oil. You'll smell it for yourselves when you go downstairs."

"Sulphur!" dithered Mrs. Inkersley. "As sure as I live it's the Fiend!"

"You are certain you heard nothing more, Hamlet?" said Prudence.

"Nothing more?—you are sure, my son?" urged the mother.

"No—nothing, nothing, nothing! I listened outside the study door, and they mumbled a lot of stuff. It was all stuff, I know."

"But what was it about, my boy?"

"Yes, what was the subject of their conversation, Hamlet?"

"I couldn't hear nothing. I just listened at the key-hole; then when they got up I hid in the coat-press."

"You should *never* listen at key-holes, Hamlet!" said Mrs. Inkersley, in deep disappointment. "I am disgusted!"

"And I also," agreed Prudence.

"Listeners never hear good of themselves. I thought you knew better, Hamlet! Father would be so angry if he knew!"

"Father's never angry with *me*," said Hamlet serenely.

"If only it had been you who let the man in, Prue!" lamented Mrs. Inkersley.

"How could I tell it was he?" said the daughter sadly.

"True. I was certain who it was; but it so took me aback, and then my nerves are so delicate. I should have swooned at the sight of him."

"And besides, what would father have thought? No one ever opens the door to that man except father himself. This is the first time he has missed being on the lookout for him."

"The first time—yes; because the wretch let slip the usual date. Oh, Prudence, what an opportunity have we lost! Goodness knows what we might not have found out!"

"Well, it is no use worrying now," said Prudence. "Let us go downstairs."

They descended to the hall, and found it redolent of pomatum. They sniffed and sniffed in the twilight, but with small satisfaction. The Man in Black, like another nameless animal, had left his scent behind him, and no more. 'Twas a sweet and oily odour, suggestive of a sleek and slimy character. Haply they might one day identify the unknown by his pomade.

Mr. Inkersley rejoined his family, much later, at the supper-table, where he ate nothing, and talked with forced hilarity.

He evidenced the constraint of one harbouring a secret, assuming unconsciousness thereof on the part of others, but painfully aware, meanwhile, that they are bursting with curiosity and guessing half the truth. Bodily prostration and mental relief were in his voice and manner. His face was white, his hands tremulous, he looked limp and fagged out. Yet he talked boisterously, and his eyes glittered. Plainly he had undergone something, and "got it over." He was like a man just back from the dentist's, with molars guaranteed solid for six solid months. It was a mood that had recurred twice in every year of his married life. It supervened, always, upon a visit from the Man in Black.

After awhile he withdrew to an old sofa upholstered in shabby green velvet, close to one of the windows—his favourite resting-place—and hoisted Hamlet straddle-legs upon his chest.

"It is Hamlet's birthday on the twentieth," he said, "and our silver wedding on the last day of next month. We are going to have a roaring time. Thou shalt have a royal birthday, thou little Prince of Denmark! What shall father give thee for a birthday present, sonnie?"

"A bicycle," answered Hamlet promptly.

"And a bicycle thou shalt have, or I am a Dutchman not a Dane."



II

The exceptional heat of the season had proved extremely trying to Mr. Inkersley. Throughout the spring and summer months his nights had been troubled, and well nigh sleepless. He was suffering in body, mind, and temper.

At about two o'clock in the morning that followed upon the Man in Black's visit, he fell into a doze, and from the doze into the lethargy of exhaustion. Of the windows of the connubial chamber, one was shut, the other open. Mr. Inkersley's gold watch—it had belonged to a brother, long since deceased—lay upon a small table beside the bed. Bright with use, it gave a speck of fire in the shadow of the hangings.

Herbert Inkersley dreamed.

Midst a gloaming that is not twilight, over a substance that is not earth, he moves, by a process that is not walking, upon a quest that is not of his will.

He reaches a kind of waste-land—a strange and yet familiar scene where it is neither day nor night, summer nor winter ; where there is no trace of nature animate or

inanimate, yet the air seems to vibrate with the sorrow of unnumbered generations; and the grief of ages settles upon him like malarial mist. And gradually the sense of sorrow intensifies to that of fear. He divines that he is near the slums, the notable slums, the terrible slums, where he so often spends his midnights. But he can trust himself. He will not stray too near those dread purlieus; no, certainly not. Yet their sadness is in his eyes, and their terror all around him. In fact they are perilously near.

The prospect changes. The load of grief and fear weighs heavier upon the sleeper's soul; but the landscape is different. It is a lumber-yard of hell, and the rubbish of centuries has been shot there. Scrap-iron, in what quantity and of what magnitude! There are boilers, tubes, fly-wheels, cog-wheels, enough to have kept the world in motion; beams and girders to support the mission-halls and music-halls of Christendom, all red and rank with rust. Things of music: cathedral organs, broken down into forests of pipes and reeds; hurdy-gurdies, rotted by the rain, in heaps; stacks of twisted horns and trumpets, decaying into verdegriis. The refuse of the home is there, the treasures of the midden; mountains of cinders, cart-loads of potato-peelings; old

shoes, old shovels, old brooms, old knives; oyster-shells, cabbage-stalks; and the suffocating smell of the misken rises from the mounds. There is ball-room rubbish; satin slippers, split and dirty, ragged lace, shredded robes of silk and velvet, broken fans, worn-out gloves, withered bouquets, down-at-heel pumps, soiled programmes. It is a melancholy chaos, and the dreamer wanders through it in vague depression. And the slums are desperately near.

Perdition! From inside a gigantic boiler leaps a tiny urchin clad in rust-coloured rags. He turns and grimaces hideously at the intruder, then flits away. It is Hamlet—Hamlet dwarfed to the dimensions of an infant, but animated by the malignity of an aged fiend.

And, woe is everything, he makes direct for the slums!—those indescribable, unimaginable slums! He will be lost! He will be stolen, kidnapped, murdered! It is a parent's first duty to save his only son, so the parent follows in pursuit. With the velocity of thought he plunges into those horrifying precincts.

It is darker. It is dark. And yet he can see everything vividly clearly; blind blank walls, lustrous with the grease of human contact; cataract-stricken windows, where fiend faces may be lurking on the watch;

rickety hoardings, full of chinks for possible leering eyes ; corner-posts, where forms of corpse-like criminality loll ; shuttered dens where there are women (*are* they women?) clustering infamously upon worn-out steps. How wonderful and how providential that no one notes his presence ! What will happen when they *do* note his presence ? And meanwhile he is drifting nearer the centre of this metropolis of crime. How ever to escape ?

He is wafted to a quarter of utter desolation. The silence and the solitude are appalling. The vile semblants of humanity have vanished. He crosses abandoned squares, he threads labyrinthine alleys, in naked loneliness. Doors and windows are nailed up, papered up, boarded up, plastered up, bricked up ; but the very pavements savour of wickedness incredible. It is a fallen suburb, cursed with blindness for its sins, and lying moribund ; but the air is pregnant with the dumb horror of death in life and life in death. What do those blank walls conceal ? What foul entities may not cling to the rafters of those towering structures, and nestle in the recesses of those poisonous courts ? And to think that Hamlet is there !—a little tender boy, let loose in that accursed spot where a lost soul might lose itself !

Suddenly the child reappears. Clad now

in black, a veritable young Hamlet, he drops, from some unmeasured altitude, like a cat, at his father's feet, turns, and again chills him with a shocking grimace, and cat-like darts away.

Full of grief, anger, and unspeakable anxiety, the parent again gives chase. Nothing is closed against him, for he is a brain without a body. He worms his way through cellars, sewers, and tunnels underground. He climbs up rain-spouts, enters upper rooms by skylights, passes out through attic windows, and traverses mountains of leaded roof. Nowhere can he find the boy, and everywhere is that atmosphere of supernatural iniquity.

Then, by the witchery of nightmares, he is on solid earth once more, and close to home. In fact he is at home, as home may travesty itself in visions of the night. He enters an immensely lofty house surrounded by dead trees and rust-eaten railings. It is a caricature, drawn by some etcher who died of delirium tremens, of the house where his body sleeps.

The dreamer passes within, and the breath of terror thickens. The place has the pungent dampness of a vault. Scales of soot fall, like flakes of black snow, around him and upon him. The slabs of the pavement begin to break and sink beneath his

feet. He shouts, "Hamlet, Hamlet!" but his voice comes back like a boomerang, and smites him with fresh dread. Rats and mice take alarm and scamper away in thousands from the shelling walls, from the rotting wainscotes, from the yielding chequered flag-stones. The hole is rank with villany and quick with death.

On the left hand is a staircase, infinitely lofty and decayed to shreds; on the right, and facing him, a long dark passage. At the end of the passage, far, far away, glimmers a light. Things of darkness make for a light, and the thing like Hamlet may have done so. Therefore the dreamer follows suit, and immediately finds himself in a vacant room, bare and unfurnished. Upon a battered table a tallow dip flares in a black bottle, and emits a sickening odour—an odour as of rancid pomade. The floor of the chamber is an inch thick in dust. Full of a ghastly foreboding, he examines the floor. No footmarks are visible. It is an untrodden sward of grey plush. And how then came the light upon the table?

And wonder of wonders, puzzle of puzzles, here is the old green velvet sofa, standing where a moment ago there was nothing! "I will lie down and wait," he reflects. He is but befooling his terrors, for he knows he *must*. He would renounce his

only son, and life, and immortality, to be clear of that foul den; but fate forces him to the sofa. He shuts his eyes as he reclines thereon, but the eyelids of dreamland are transparent. He covers them with his hands, but his palms are magnifying glasses.

Now precisely at this juncture a most unusual thing came to pass in the material world, where beings more or less rational reside, and laws more or less natural prevail. It happened thus. A small velvety creature, an organism almost human in conformation, but borne upon leathern claw-tipped wings, wheeled into the nuptial apartment of the Inkersleys. It is denominated by Zoologists *Vespertilio Pipistrellus*, but popularly yclept a bat. It had left its anchorage in the warm chimney of an ivy-clad cottage, and being a foolish little bat, or else an ambitious little bat, or possibly a combination of both, had fluttered townwards. It entered the open window above-mentioned,—attracted perhaps by the glint of the watch of the late William Inkersley—dashed back at the other window, not open, encountered the invisible screen through which civilization contemplates nature, and reverted, stunned, into the marital alcove.

It was then that in the sanctuary where the soul of our sleeper kept watch, events

quickened. From the uppermost lofts of the dream-house, thousands of miles overhead, comes a sound—a muffled rumbling sound, as of falling, or as of dragging, or as of gathering together. The weariness of ages and the stealth of evil are in the movement. Does some corpse burst from its coffin? or some mummy from its swathes? or does some giant turn over in his sleep? Cold threads of terror are drawn through the soul in Dreamland and the body in the bed, and every fibre contracts. The pause that followed was filled with a silence that shrieked. Little *Vespertilio Pipistrellus*, commonly called a bat, lay motionless upon the toilet-table.

Presently, in the material world, where beings more or less rational reside, and laws more or less natural prevail, little *Vespertilio Pipistrellus*, usually described as a bat, began to recover his wits, and flapped with his wings once or twice among the toilet-ware. Simultaneously, in the dream-house, there is a footfall, thousands of miles overhead. And Herbert Inkersley's material heart pumped bursts of liquid ice through body and soul.

Little *Vespertilio Pipistrellus* grew stronger, and its struggles more vigorous. And whilst the footfall booms more loud, the spirit of Herbert Inkersley thrills and

quivers, and his material heart shrinks in its socket. What is going to appear? But will it actually appear? No, no, it cannot, it must not appear! How merciful that the staircase is so lofty, and so rotten! It may break. It is bound to break. Yes, it *shall* break! Oh, for the love of pity, let it break, and that frightful Thing be dashed out of existence! Something *must* break, be it the rat-riddled ladder in Dreamland, or the mind of the man in the bed.

Little Vespertilio Pipistrellus keeps on flapping irregularly, and the footfall approaches irregularly. It halts again and again. It foots each step with both feet, as little children do. It fumbles and it stumbles; but, alack, it does not fall! The timbers creak and groan beneath a deadly load, but refuse to yield.

Little Vespertilio Pipistrellus circled the bed chamber, bumping here and there. And in the den in Dreamland the Thing is at the door. It is at the door! It gropes upon the panels. It fumbles for the latch. It claws, stupidly, with its nails upon the boards. Is it blind? Is it drunk? Is it somnambulant? Is it dead? Ah, that the encounter were but over! O that the fell Essence would but enter quickly and destroy! O, to be struck oblivious, to swoon, to die!—The sleeper's heart shrivelled to a

knot of string in his body, and his tongue to a suffocating rag in his mouth. Little Vespertilio Pipistrellus swept through the open window, never to return, and the seer awoke.

Yes, Herbert Inkersley awoke, and found that *it was not a dream*.

The ice-water in his veins had turned to boiling blood. It throbbed with a sound of stamping in his ears. He was bathed in sweat. During interminable moments he lay rigid. "It was a dream, only a dream, nothing but a dream," he told himself in frantic repetition. "But a dream, but a dream, but a dream," echoed the cerebral pulses in scalding mockery. "Yet the feet are there, still there, still there," they added. "They are fading away, away, away!"

Yes, the startled footsteps were in rapid retreat. He could hear them. He could *feel* them—tramp, tramp, throb, throb. Wild with terror, he gripped and shook his wife. She awoke suddenly—and in alarm.

"Clara!" he blurted in thick accents. "Clara! Listen! Listen, for the love of heaven! Do you hear nothing?"

"Nothing," she answered, sitting up in bed. "Nothing. You frighten me Herbert!"

"Hush—hark—! there it goes again!" he gasped between teeth that rattled.

"What, Herbert, what?" she quavered, caught with the infection of his terror.

"Feet!" he hissed. "*The* feet. They came and now they are going back. Listen now! Can't you here? You must be deaf or daft!"

Quivering, she held her breath and strained her ears.

"I believe I *do* hear something," she said. "The house must be haunted! Get up and strike a light, or I shall die! Oh, Herbert, Herbert, I am certain there is some evil spirit lurking round us! The place is under a curse!"

It was the beating of her husband's heart she heard.

With the light of a candle the wife's terrors of demonism vanished, or rather they transferred themselves to her husband's face. It was the face of another man. She had never seen it before. Grooves, where there had been no wrinkle, scarred it deep. Ridges stood out in unwonted places. It was ashen grey. The mouth was so drawn that no lips remained visible. The eyes were red danger-lights, pent in purple hollows. The man had dived into the forbidden depths of pandemonium, and his face reflected its fires as in a glass darkly.

"Oh, Herbert, my husband—my love!" she cried, throwing her arms around him,

and pressing her forehead against his chest to avoid the sight of his face ; " you are ill. You have had some dreadful nightmare. To-morrow I shall send for Dr. Dolling. You will let me, won't you, dear ? "

III

Sunday was always a day of rejoicing in the house of Inkersley. The girls rejoiced because of purple and fine linen whereby they glorified themselves, velvet and pearl buttons wherewith they armoured Hamlet; and he, in turn, rejoiced because of gluttonous feeds, and extended license to assert his princedom. Mrs. Inkersley rejoiced to marshal her bevy of beauties to church beneath the gaze of admiring neighbours. Mr. Inkersley found milder satisfaction in that, morning and evening, he had the house all to himself, and could mope in solitude as on no other day. He never went to church. He said he found more peace of mind at home.

It was the Sabbath, and mother and children returned from morning prayer full of the customary back-from-church joy. Having doffed their monstrous hats, worked off their tight kid gloves, and stacked their gilded prayer books in the vestibule ready for vesper use, they spread themselves out round the table. The girls, in their white frocks and red sashes, resembled a garland

of lilies tied up by scarlet ribbon. Without undue constraint, all were delightfully conscious of that starched-and-ironed freshness, that dressed-for-exhibition cleanliness, which invests man and woman with a sense of their fullest worth, and dignifies the festal hours of life. The fragrance of scented soap and lavender-water mingled pleasantly with the incense of baked meats. Knives and forks clinked an accompaniment to shrill chatter and merry laughter. Mrs. Inkersley, all smiles and benignity, wore a costume that was a thing to wonder on. By what gymnastics she had contrived to get into it was a mystery herself and Prudence alone could have explained. Her husband, sombre and taciturn, still slouched in alpaca jacket, soft shirt, and sailors' knot, and still defended himself with the periodical his children had learned to call his fire-screen.

Mrs. Inkersley was a pious woman after a sweet old-world fashion, and it was her custom to put a few questions to the children, during the Sunday dinner, on the sermon they had just heard. In this exercise she usually led off with Hamlet. On the present occasion, observing that he had stuffed himself to distension, she began :

"Now Hammie, my boy, what was the text this morning?"

"There wasn't any text at all."

"No text! Hamlet, you cannot have been attending!"

"Oh, didn't I attend though! Mr. Benedict didn't have any text. He preached about all the ten Commandments."

"He preached on the twentieth chapter of Exodus, and said it included the whole catalogue," trilled Maud.

"The *monologue*, stupid!" corrected Mildred.

"No it is *not* the monologue," cried Hamlet. "It's called the Decalogue, and Mr. Benedict said it was only ten words. He said 'Now I'm going to teach you all law and order in ten words.'"

"It was all a fib, anyhow!" said Doris. "He hung on three quarters of an hour. I thought he was never going to stop!"

"Thirty-eight minutes precisely," said Prudence. "And Doris, you should break yourself of that habit of talking slang. It is extremely vulgar."

"Mr Benedict preached eight-and-thirty minutes on the Decalogue, which is Hebrew for the Ten Commandments," decreed the mother judicially. "And now tell me, my Hamlet, why was the Decalogue given unto men?"

"So that when they're naughty they've always got something to break."

"Right," muttered Inkersley behind his book.

"For shame, Herbert!" remonstrated the mother. "Hamlet, you have got muddled. What kind of people are they who break the Commandments?"

"Good ones."

"Right again," murmured the cynic.

"My child, my child!" cried the mother, "you have got sadly mixed up. Good, well-conducted people break only *a few* of the Commandments, and that only occasionally."

"No; they break 'em all," insisted Hamlet; "or else Mr. Benedict tells crams. He said so."

"Yes he *did*, ma!" cried Rosamond,

"Better and better!" croaked the voice behind the Review.

"He said that once upon a time there was a very good man," squeaked Maud, "as good as salt, which they're so fond of in Jerusalem—"

"Yes," interrupted Gladys excitedly, "and he broke all the lot!"

"Though he had made up his mind not to," enlarged Mildred.

"First," exclaimed Hamlet, "he committed idolatry, because he had a little boy that he spoilt."

"A form of that particular sin," interpo-

lated Prudence "which Mr. Benedict thinks will never quite disappear from among men."

"Then," proceeded the spoilt child of the family, "he took the name of God in vain, 'cause at the railway station, on his wedding day, his mother-in-law asked him to send her his photo, and he said, 'I will, God bless you, I will,' and then forgot to."

"No, that wasn't the next," lisped little Eileen, whose golden hair dangled to the table-cloth.

"Yes it *was*," insisted Hamlet. "And he profaned the Sabbath because he wrote his letters on Saturday night, which is the Jews' Sunday."

"No, no, you stupid boy!" cried Maud. "It was because he put them in the pillar-box on Sunday morning, so that the poor postman had to take them out instead of going to church."

"So then we ought to keep two Sabbaths in each week?" enquired the father; "is that the moral?"

"Yes, papa dear," answered Maud innocently. "Then the good man in the sermon stole things because—"

"No, that's not the next!" cried Hamlet in shrill scorn. "He committed murder—"

"No, no, he *didn't*!" How could he be a good man——?"

"Yes he did!" yelled Hamlet, "Mr. Benedict said so. He had a brother he was jealous of, and one cold bitter winter night, when all the church bells were playing 'Christmas Day in the Morning,' the good man's brother came home late——"

"No, it was early!" protested Maud.

"No it *wasn't*! He came home late from a Christmas party——"

"Ah, that accounts for a lot of things," said the father; but Mrs. Inkersley noted that his voice had a forbidding tone.

"He came home late," Hamlet continued, "and he knocked and knocked at the front door, and the good man wouldn't come down to let him in 'cause he was warm and comfy in bed; so the poor brother lay down on the doorstep and died of frost-bites!"

"And ever since," said Mildred, concluding the anecdote, "the good man thought he heard his poor brother knocking at the door in the dead of night; and Mr. Benedict says that's the way conscience knocks at the door of our hearts."

"But, Hamlet, you have forgotten one commandment," said Mrs. Inkersley, availing herself of a lull in the debate.

Her husband lowered his literary buckler and revealed a twitching face. "Clara," he said, and his voice grated like pumice-stone—"Clara, is it absolutely necessary

that you should turn our dinner-table into a Bible-class?"

Mrs. Inkersley looked startled. "Certainly not, my dear," she answered; "certainly not. I only wished to learn whether the children had been attentive. I saw Hamlet staring up into the gallery so."

Hamlet promptly assumed the injured. "I wasn't staring," he said indignantly. "I only wanted to find out if Mr. Foljambe saw us."

"Mr. Foljambe!" repeated his mother in faint astonishment. "My dear boy what *are* you dreaming of?"

"Mr. Foljambe!" echoed Prudence, in surprise that savoured of the artificial, "Mr. Foljambe!—You *stupid* child!"

"Foljambe!" gulped Mr. Inkersley. "Do you mean to tell me that that black-guard has turned up again?"

"Certainly not, my love," quaked Mrs. Inkersley.

"Certainly not, father," corroborated Prudence.

But the younger children were less certain or more sincere. The six blondes took up the conundrum with gusto, and proceeded to debate in shrill trebles, as to whether or no Mr. Foljambe had been a member of the congregation.

. Black clouds gathered on the brow of

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Mr. Inkersley. He rose dumbly from the table, kicked back his chair, clutched his periodical as though it were the throat of Mr. Foljambe, and slouched from the room, slamming the door behind him. Silence and sorrow fell upon the party. Mrs. Inkersley and Prudence moved at one another with meaning glances.

"Your poor father!" murmured the materfamilias at length.

"Yes, poor father!" sighed Prudence in hypocritical assent.

"Poor father!" piped Hamlet. "This heat 'll be the death of him."

In his study, Inkersley collapsed into an armchair, his chin resting on his chest, and groaned aloud:

"Pickrell, footsteps, Foljambe! Every curse and every demon combined against me! No cure, no expiation! Restore all? None to receive it! Suffer punishment? None to inflict it! Do penance? Unavailing!—Penance! Oh, have I not wrought penance? Five-and-twenty years of slow fire! Five-and-twenty years of fasting and watching! A quarter of a century in the anguish of a crisis! What is it all? Sickness?—Madness? Can no man cure me?—no man even tell me?

No; let me pine in doubt until I die of doubt!"

He raised his head, and glanced round the walls of his den. From floor to ceiling they were completely lined with books; new books, old books; thick books, thin books. There were worm-eaten folios, bound in wood, clamped with brass, printed in gothic letters. There were slim modern manuals, gimp and frigid; little matter, much index. Philosophy, theology, metaphysics, spiritualism, natural science, had clotted themselves in masses. They seemed this afternoon to cling wickedly to the walls. They were vampires dozing in the daylight, they had wooed and lured him into endless mazes. Having sucked his blood they had left him dry, themselves remaining dry. They had answered not one riddle; they had solved not one problem. They had made darkness visible and pain palpable. They had dried up the dew of his youth, for no recompense. That study was his cell, the books its windows; but the windows were battened down past hope, and the prisoner was dying of slow suffocation. Philosophy, Metaphysics, Science had turned volte-face and fled at the tags of a sermon, the babble of a child.

In the evening Mr. Inkersley rejoined his

wife and children at tea and cakes, potted-meat and watercress. The meal was early on Sundays, in order that the family might attend evening service at St. Augustine's. He carefully settled the expression of his face before entering the dining-room, and strove not to appear ashamed of his recent explosion. He found himself the object of a hushed solicitude that made him feel extremely uncomfortable and dismally penitent.

"I think I won't go to church to-night," said Prudence caressingly; "father will be so dull all by himself."

"Let *me* stay with you, Herbert," coaxed Mrs. Inkersley. "The children can go quite well alone. It is light up to nearly nine o'clock."

"Let *me* stay with father!" said Doris.

"Let *me* stay!" said Mildred, and a chorus of pitying, pleading voices was raised in filial self-sacrifice.

"Stay with *me*—on no account!" said Mr. Inkersley. "I need no guardian angels! What have I done that I should be invalidated like this?"

"You look so ill and low-spirited," argued his wife; "and this house is so gloomy at night."

"I don't find it gloomy. I find it soothing."

"You would soon know the difference if you would go and live in a decent one," said Prudence. "The place is killing us all."

"You all look very well on it."

"Hamlet is a perfect shadow."

"Hamlet is naturally pale—" he glanced uneasily towards the hope of his life, who was engaged in licking the jam from a slice of bread—"besides, I intend to send him away to school in a year or two."

"I shan't go!" shouted Hamlet.

"Hush, my boy!" said Mrs. Inkersley. "You must not say 'shan't' to father!"

"Father couldn't live without me!" said Hamlet, tossing aside the jamless bread and holding out his plate for more.

"You don't yet know what father is capable of!" said Mr. Inkersley with dreadful severity.

"Suppose *I* stay at home with you to-night, puppa?" suggested Hamlet wheedlingly. "You'll be so lonesome all by yourself, and I don't want to go to church again."

"Not to-night, my pet," answered the father. "To-night I have a special desire to be alone."

He chafed and fretted whilst the girls buttoned one another into their little kid gloves, and drew each other's hair through the elastics of their astonishing hats. They

squabbled in shrill voices meanwhile, and seemed as though they would never make an end of identifying their glittering prayer-books. Right willingly he then provided all the young people with silver for the plate—shillings, sixpences, threepenny-bits, according to the length of their frocks—and irritation contended with love as he watched them at length sail chattering away into the gold of the evening. Mrs. Inkersley led the procession, supported on the one hand by Prudence, on the other by Hamlet carrying her portly church-service. The six blondes followed in her wake, like a fleet of snow-white yachts flying rose-coloured pennons. Inkersley heaved a sigh of relief. He was alone in the great misty house.

He made for the dining-room and stretched himself upon the old green velvet sofa. Pipe in mouth, he lay and gazed upon a portrait above the hearth. Its dead eyes met and rivetted his own.

Now why should Herbert Inkersley pore so hungrily upon that picture? Not for its artistic merits, certainly. It was poorly and stiffly painted. It was a diagram, untruthful in its rigid truthfulness. It was the map of a human countenance, the front elevation of a male bust.

Precise, pedantic, must the wight have been whose lineaments were reflected

there. The face, necktied to the chin, was hairless and cadaverous, nose and lips indefinite and thin. Destitute of colour, it loomed, a patch of yellow, from a fog of brown; but that may have resulted from bad quality of pigments, or the action of damp. The eyes had no light. They were shallow apertures from which no soul looked out; but that may have been attributable to unskilled workmanship, and the darkening of years. Howbeit, it stood (or should we say it hung?) a dead man's counterfeit presentment. 'Twas the portrait of a corpse. And it represented the late William Inkersley, elder brother, twenty-five years deceased, of him we already know.

There are those who, being dead, yet speak; and "Uncle William" was of the category. He exercised over the house of Inkersley invisible but autocratic sway. His deeds were tradition, his sayings proverbs. The eight children, from Prudence to Hamlet, had been morally suckled and mentally nourished on the memory of him whose likeness bleached above the hearth. He was an ethical standard, a spiritual ideal, which the mother dangled tirelessly before the mind's eye of her offspring. "What *would* your Uncle William have thought of you?" she would say to a refractory little one. "*Try* and be like your

Uncle William!" "Your Uncle William never behaved like *that*!"

It was a foregone conclusion that, had he not faded away in the prime of his days, Uncle William would have been Prime Minister of England and Dictator General of the British Empire. It was his natural right. He had possessed all virtues, all talents. He had been (*valeat quantum* the effigy above the hearth) of the supremest physical beauty. His life was an epic in forty-one cantos. His death was humanity's loss and the angel's gain. If anyone had asked Mrs. Inkersley why then she had cruelly abandoned, and abandoning possibly destroyed, such a paragon of earthly excellence, having accepted the darkling Herbert in his stead, she might haply have answered that William was too good to be married. Be that as it may, the fact remains: Herbert said "I take thee, Clara," and William died.

It was, perhaps, in order to anoint a blistered conscience, that she deified her jilted lover gone before. On his reputation she had erected a cultus. She had created him *genius loci* of Denmark Lodge and tutelary spirit of all who sojourned there. The children acknowledged his mysterious presidency. The maid-servants who came and went like swallows year by year,

recognized his invisible guestship ; the bed-chamber of the master and mistress was traditionally known in the kitchen as " Mr. William's room." One inmate, and one only, rarely breathed that name, and winced when it sounded in his hearing ; and that one was the surviving brother.

And he lay now in the glimmering twilight, with that pallid shade before him, and gazed, and gazed, and gazed.

" Oh ! look at father—do look at father ! " screamed Hamlet. " This heat will certainly be the death of him ! "

The family have returned from church. In answer to Hamlet's abrupt and violent ring, a man has opened the front-door. Such a man ! His hair stands erect upon his head. His cheeks are greenly livid. Sparks of the sunset glint upon his bare teeth and the facets of his bulging eyes. The children recognize the clothes, but not the countenance. Mrs Inkersley has seen it once before, only a few days since, fresh from fiendland in the dead of night. From whence has that soul returned ? What have those wild orbs looked upon ? What effulgence of what inferno does that drawn mask shadow back ?

The wife straightway melted into tears. " O Herbert, Herbert," she whimpered

feebly; "you are ill—very ill! You have had one of those dreadful attacks, I know you have! *Do* let me send for Dr. Dolling—*Do*!"

"Nothing ails me!" he gritted; "nothing—nothing! I fell asleep on the sofa, and the door-bell woke me suddenly. That is all. A man always looks a bit white after sleep."

A bit white!

He slunk away to his study, whilst the family instinctively circled round the old green velvet sofa in the dining-room. The leaves of a *Saturday Review*, crumpled and detached, lay scattered upon the carpet, near to the foot of the couch. On the right hand, two yards away, Mr. Inkersley's pipe—a favourite meerschaum, carefully coloured—lay in splinters. An idea suddenly flashed into Prudence's mind. She laid her hand upon the sofa.

"It is cold!" she whispered, shuddering. "He has not been asleep at all!"

Mrs. Inkersley palpitated with fright. "Your father has seen something!" she stuttered.

IV

Dr. Dolling looked at his watch and sighed. "I have enjoyed myself hugely," quoth he. "I have taken tea with your wife and Miss Inkersley. I have had a romp with Hamlet and Eileen in the garden. I have sat in this delightful old library best part of an hour, and heard you discourse on the follies of modern science ; but—" he stopped, and sighed again.

"But what ?" mumbled Mr. Inkersley.

"But for all the good I have done professionally, I might as well have been in Hong Kong."

"For all the good doctors do professionally, they might as well take lodgings on the Great Wall of China, and stay there."

"Then why send for me ?"

"I am a hen-pecked husband. Years ago my wife was satisfied with rings and watch-chains, ermine tippets and sable muffs. Now, like the late Oliver Twist and all other spoilt children, she crys for more. I must 'send for Dr. Dolling'. So for Dr. Dolling I send, and Dr. Dolling comes. And I may add that I am always charmed

to see you, my dear boy, whether you are sent for or not."

"A visit of two hours," said the doctor, "to take tea, play with the children, and talk about the weather. Fortunate that the drought has driven all my serious patients to the seaside."

"Fortunate for them," laughed Mr. Inkersley. "They stand a chance of not being poisoned."

"You are incurable!"

"Of course. Ills that the doctor doesn't see, and nature declines to cure, *must* be incurable. You all keep that card up your sleeve!"

There was a knock at the door of the study. "Come in," said Mr. Inkersley, and a stout elderly man, of kind and affable appearance, entered. He wore the uniform of the church.

"My dear Inkersley," he said, shaking hands and sitting down, "how do you find yourself to day? How are you, Dolling? Hope your patient has been tractable? Saw your trap at the door, and just looked in to enquire. Had a chat with Mrs. Inkersley, and she scared me a little. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Dear me, no!" said the *malade malgré lui*, with a shade of impatience. "I am delighted to have your company, Benedict,

but your ministerial services aren't needed yet. I had an attack of the heat. Never could stand it."

"An attack of the heat?" pondered the clergyman. "I have always wondered what that saying means."

"Don't believe a word he says, Mr. Benedict," said the doctor mischievously. "He wants your help. I have been a whole afternoon trying to prescribe for his body; and it is hopeless. See what you can do for his soul."

"Profane as ever, Dolling!" said the clergyman. "Don't crow. Even Science comes back to the Church at last, as the Prodigal Son came home."

"Ah, we can't help what they do with us after we are dead," retorted the doctor. "For my part, I propose leaving my body to the Grimville School of Medicine. Is the Burial Service used in such cases?"

"No, be cremated!" said Inkersley, with sudden interest. "Be cremated, and set a good example. By cremation an offensive thing is got rid of. By dissection it is made more offensive, and to no purpose."

"To no purpose!" cried the doctor. "To no purpose—! while every gain to pathological discovery—"

"Pathological discovery!" said Inkersley in scorn. "That threadbare cant! No,

Dolling, if you can't cure me while I am alive you shan't cut me up when I am dead to find out what I died of. Interesting, no doubt, to you ; but quite uninteresting to me."

"If you refuse to tell me your symptoms, how can I possibly cure you?" reasoned the doctor in genuine disgust.

"There!" cried the heretic. "The old-fashioned gipsy in a frock coat! First we must tell our misfortunes with our own mouth, and then we are told our fortunes, which are the same thing under a different word, by our own palm—or our own pulse, it makes no difference—for a trifling fee. Oh, Dolling!"

"You are a Philistine on principle," said the doctor. "It is waste of breath to argue with you."

"Be it so. At any rate I am going to cheat the priest of science and the priest of faith at one *coup*. I shall be cremated like the heathen I am."

"It is certainly a heathenish practice," said Mr. Benedict, "and its growing prevalence marks a genuine revival of pagan thought and pagan thoughtlessness. Forgetting God who made him, man would make himself a demigod, self sufficient and self terminating. Himself *humus de humo*, humility would bid him, when the fire of

life has fled, lie down again in the earth he sprang from, to dissolve sweetly into her fructifying bosom and await re-birth therefrom. That which ends in a blaze goes out in smoke. The material flames of cremation are a perfect emblem of the minds that favour them; no continuity of hope or effort; no reverence for the past nor duty to the future; a short day here—a glare if possible, and then the blackness of darkness for ever.”

Mr. Inkersley looked pleased. “Both in science and in faith,” he assented, “the principles of procreation and decay are cognate. They are really one thing, an indivisible *morphe*, presenting a dichotomous face to us in whom they operate. Deny it, doctor, if you can.”

“I don’t. But like all philosophers you make abstractions into personal monstrosities. You begin with common sense, and end up with imaginary Siamese Twins. Any myth can get into society dressed up in fine words.”

“Pilate and Herod combine against me!” said Inkersley. “I stand alone. Well, let me die and be cremated alone.”

“You needn’t talk about dying yet,” said the doctor. “Your body, Mr. Inkersley, is as sound as a bell.”

“Sound as a bell? Big Ben, I believe,

is cracked; and his bigger brother in Moscow has a piece chipped out."

"I am convinced," said Mr. Benedict, "that the origin of much suffering is spiritual. You and your fraternity, Dr. Dolling, get more than your share of the world's confidence. The increasing tendency to treat sin therapeutically bodes very ill for the future. Wickedness cannot be cured medicinally."

"Hear, hear!" cried Inkersley clapping his hands. "Exactly what I was saying before you came in, Benedict."

"Sin is another abstraction," said the doctor.

"A hermit, segregated from his birth, might conceivably deny the fact of human sin," said the clergyman. "Certainly no doctor of medicine can."

"Sin and sickness are interchangeable terms," said Inkersley, eager to promote discussion even at the price of consistency. "He who denies it has never sinned. Argal, no man can deny it."

"If," said the doctor, "certain practices, proscribed by social convenience, result in certain forms of suffering, it still remains for us, and not for the clergy to cure them. Sermons and Sacraments may be very consoling, but they will not eradicate disease. Sin is a theory, but sickness is a fact."

Mr. Benedict smiled gleefully. "I will meet you," he said, "on your favourite field of Fact. Now where have you visited to-day? H'm, ha! Answer me that! Where have you been to-day? At Alderman Swiller's—dying of drink. At police-constable Darling's—dying of something worse. At the Workhouse Infirmary—where ninety per cent of the inmates are dying of their misdeeds. True, is it not? I have been where you have been, and seen what you have seen."

"H'm. What then?"

"What then? Only this—that if those poor wretches had made sermons and sacraments their guide in life they would have been happy and prosperous people at this minute. That is all."

"H'm," said the doctor; "perhaps." He was not a controversialist, and he was not an Agnostic, and he had a profound admiration for Mr. Benedict, whose parishioners supplied many of his patients and whose good works he knew of.

"I am sorry to see, Dolling," concluded the cleryman, "that like all your colleagues you are disposed to anti-clericalism. You doctors covertly dislike the Church, and in a manner you are right. We are your worst enemies. If men were to put the soul before the body, your trade would soon be

gone, for most people would die of old age. Your calling, noble though it be, is a monument to human sin. You thrive by man's physical scabs and filth, just as lawyers batten on his moral weaknesses and truculence. In the life to come there will be neither doctors nor lawyers, but all will be priests and choristers of God."

"Who takes in vain the name of lawyers, he, he?" said a small voice at the door.

"Mr Pergamen!" cried Inkersley "You too! Speak of—"

"Hush, hush!" said the clergyman, "Don't call our good friend bad names."

"I saw the doctor's carriage at the door," exclaimed Mr. Pergamen, "so I looked in to see what was wrong."

"Nothing wrong!" vociferated Mr. Inkersley. "I had an attack of indigestion, and it awoke my wife to the value of her husband. If my finger aches she begins to find out what a treasure I am."

"It is very bilious weather, he, he." Mr. Pergamen seated himself gingerly on the extreme corner of a chair. He had a small red face and large white whiskers.

"Mr. Pergamen, I and the doctor are having a fight," said the clergyman. "You shall arbitrate—"

"Pooh, don't ask Pergamen." said Mr. Inkersley. "A lawyer, like a Member of

Parliament, has no personal opinions. A lawyer thinks what is correct, which is what his grandfather thought, and does what his grandfather did. His laws are those of the Medes and Persians—only more so; and his opinions are shut up in them.

"We were arguing about cremation," said Mr. Benedict.

"No, about sin," said Dr. Dolling.

"What matter?" said Mr. Inkersley. "Pergamen agrees to everything, and believes in nothing. Some send for the doctor when they fall sick, and some for the parson. Pergamen would call in both, and obey neither. If you, Dolling, ordered him to cut off his own leg, he would say, 'With the greatest pleasure.' But he wouldn't do it. If you, Benedict, bade him sell his investments and give to the poor, he would say, 'I shall be charmed'—"

"And do it, he, he!" said Mr. Pergamen sweetly.

"Oh yes, you bet!" said a loud coarse voice at the door.

"Wiggins!" exclaimed Mr. Inkersley. "Come with kind enquiries too? Truly, I am finding my friends!"

"But how are you getting on?" asked Mr. Wiggins. "Keep yourself warm, eh? Glad to hear it's nothing serious. Saw the doctor's carriage at the door—"

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"Oh no! not that, not that!" mourned Inkersley. "My dear Dolling, why *did* you come in a carriage?"

"I expected to find you on your back," said Wiggins. "And, my godfather! you ought to be—surrounded by the world, the flesh, and the devil—"

"Don't call Mr. Benedict names!" interrupted the lawyer in revenge.

"Now I didn't say which was which. Him the cap fits let him wear it. But what is up, Inkersley old man?"

"Up? Nothing's up. I had a liver-attack, and my friends all agree I ought to live no longer. They are here to look after my body, my soul, and my estate. Sit down Wiggins. Any news?"

"Only that the Baths and Parks Committee want to turn you out of house and home."

"What!"

"They think this would make a fine site for a geranium-bed, or a band-stand, or a 'pop-stall.'

"It has turned up again then?"

"Best thing could befall you," said the doctor, "if this old ruin were improved off the face of the earth; worst thing for me. You would live a long time and pay me no fees."

"What have they decided Wiggins?" asked Inkersley in breathless anxiety.

"Decided to do nothing. Town Councillors are always good at playing that game, so don't excite yourself. I've just left Councillor Blower refreshing himself in the Britannia Bar after the meeting. He said that he and Alderman Slow had got the proposition shelved, knowing your prejudice. Worse luck for you, say I. Property round about here won't go up."

"You are quite sure it is shelved?" questioned Inkersley, pale and gasping.

"Sure as a gun. There's no fear of the Council going counter to you old man; though, as I've told you about nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you ought to sit there yourself.

"When I sit there," murmured Inkersley, drawing a deep breath of relief, "it will be because I can't stand on my own legs any longer."

"Well, please yourself and you'll please everyone," said the estate agent, shrugging his shoulders. "But what was that the Governor of North Carolina said to the Governor of South Carolina?"

"An excellent idea," said Inkersley, jumping to his feet. "Gentlemen, come to the other room."

"You will excuse me," said the clergyman, "I am always teetotal by daylight, as you know."

"And me," said the lawyer; "I have a wife, and my wife has a nose."

"And me," said the doctor; "I took five cups of tea with Mrs. Inkersley."

"Before you separate," said Mr. Inkersley, "I want to ask a favour of you all. On the last day of next month I shall have completed twenty-five years of married life. I and my wife and children are going to watch the new quarter-of-a-century in together. I don't propose to do anything formal; but I want you four to promise me that you will come, without fail, accompanied, of course, by Mrs. Pergamen and Mrs. Wiggins, and help us to see the evening out. Mind, you are to allege no excuse, nor absent yourselves for any cause whatever. Gentlemen, will you promise this? I ask it as a favour."

"We promise," said they all.

"Go to the dining-room, Wiggins," said Inkersley. "My wife will be there, and I will join you in a minute. You know your way."

"Well, I've been there before," said Wiggins.

The master of the house saw the Learned Professions to the front door, and took leave of them from the threshold.

"When shall we three meet again?" smiled Mr. Pergamen, arm in arm with Medicine and the Church.

"On the last of next month, rain or shine," said Inkersley gravely. "Mind I take no refusal."

"As though we contemplated any!" said Mr. Benedict.

"As though!" said Dr. Dolling.

"The idea!" said Mr. Pergamen.

V

Hamlet's birthday came. The promised bicycle, standing beside his cot when he awoke, was appropriated with gracious condescension.

The father had bespoken the hire of a carriage, and early in the forenoon set out therein, accompanied by his son and heir. He meant "to drive the boy round a bit," he said. He occasionally perpetrated eccentricities of this kind.

They penetrated into the city. On their road they passed certain buildings to which Mr. Inkersley directed his son's attention.

One was a shabbily ornate structure, garnished with plaster goddesses, hanging lamps, and a huge placard notifying that "The Great Nat Linseed" would perform that evening.

"That Hall belongs to me," said Inkersley.

"Oh, does it really?" said Hamlet. "But what is it for?"

"Meetings."

"A Church?"

"A kind of one," answered the parent.

"A large congregation assembles there every night—except Sundays."

"Except Sundays? Why don't they go on Sundays?"

"Because the police won't allow them."

"Then what do they do there?"

"Do there? Well, they destroy their bodies with a slow poison called alcohol, and their minds with a moral corrosive termed ribaldry. The former vitiates the bodily tissues; the latter produces a nervous disease known as hysteria. If they persevere for a few years death always supervenes."

"It isn't true."

"It is quite true. Some day you shall see for yourself. Ugly old women paint their faces, and dance half naked there before poor people upon whom they levy taxes."

"But it's wickedness!"

"We call it pleasure now a days. And the system is useful; it keeps down the poor."

They passed a narrow frontage, where three gilded balls dangled above a slimy doorway.

"That shop belongs to me," said Inkersley. "The balls are its sign."

"What do they mean?" questioned the child.

"They mean 'two to one you don't get it out again?'"

"Get what out again?"

"The parent's bed, the baby's cradle, the father's tools, the mother's mangle—even her wedding ring."

"Then why do they take them there?"

"To borrow money to spend in my music-hall. They pawn their furniture to buy pleasure."

"I don't believe it."

"It is quite correct, all the same."

"But what do they do without their things?"

"Starve."

They threaded a street of hovels. Slat-ternly women gossipped at broken doors; unwashed children sprawled on unwashed doorsteps.

"This street belongs to me," said Inkersley in a strangely melancholy voice.

"What ugly houses!" said the child.

"And what nasty ugly people!"

"Yes; they are slaves."

"Slaves! But Prudence says people aren't allowed to keep slaves in England?"

"Not black slaves. These are white ones, you see, at least they would be if they were washed. The more of them one owns, the more one is respected."

"Then who do these belong to?"

"Really they belong to me; but I have hired them out to others. Most of the men work in a small brewery close by, of which I am landlord."

"And do you pay them for being slaves?"

"On the contrary, they pay me. They pay me for their music-hall, their pawn-broker's, and the holes they live in. I supply their workshop, their home, and their pleasures. They do all the buying, and I all the selling. That is how I am able to live in ease without doing any work."

"You're stuffing me up!" demurred the child.

"I'm telling you the solid truth," protested the father. "This is your eighth birthday; on your twenty-first these slaves will belong to you."

"I won't have 'em."

"You can sell them. In thirteen years this property will be worth a King's ransom."

The lane of huts led into a valley of ruins. Between poster-covered hoardings on right and left, one caught glimpses of a murderous slum in process of demolition. Sections of dwelling-house lay open, as though for inspection. On party-walls of ancient mansions one saw, plainly mapped, the plan of social dignity, and one read mournfully written, the story of social degeneration. The traces of floors, walls, staircases, chimneys,

roofs, that had been, stuck like diagrams to the sides of structures that yet remained. From cellar (awful cellar!) to attic (dreadful attic!) one could follow the whole design. The rich dark grease of human exudation had clouded, but had not obliterated, the patterns of wall-paper and the tints of paint.

"All this belonged to me," said Inkersley, "but the Cosmopolitan Railway Company have turned me out."

"How dared they?" questioned the child in vague indignation.

"Oh, it didn't matter. I was delighted to be rid of the property, and they paid me a lot of money for it."

"Does mother know?"

"No; and you needn't tell her. She spends enough dressing up herself and your sisters as it is. The rent of a music-hall turns them out like ballet-girls; goodness alone knows what they would blossom into with five acres of slum on their backs!"

At the entrance to a forbidding court a little farther on the carriage drew up. Parent and child alighted, and Inkersley guided his boy along a flooring of kidney-stones, grooved by deep gutters that bubbled with abominable liquid. The passage terminated in a nest of cottages, whose paper-patched windows looked down upon a cobbled yard centring in a ruinous pump. A few white-

faced ragged children clustered round the intruders, gaping upon Hamlet as though he were a natural curiosity. And indeed, in his broad white collar, stiff holland suit, long black stockings and shining shoes, he might conceivably have fallen from another planet. He clung timidly to his father's leg.

"Don't be afraid," said Inkersley; "they won't hurt you. They belong to me."

A bundle of woman's rags, surmounted by the bandaged ruins of a face, suddenly burst from one of the doorways upon the visitors. The bundle broke forth into speech, without salutation or prelude, as though answering a question already put and fiercely challenged:

"I've tell the collector as I 'aven't got a copper in the world! Me 'usband's took agen—an' me with five kids, and one of 'em down!"

"Bah, bah, the old song!" retorted Inkersley. "Is it my fault you've got a great litter of brats?"

"I can't 'elp it, sir," the bundle protested. "If I'm turned out I'll 'ave to go to the 'ouse. 'Ow would yer like to mike yer own little 'un a pauper?"

"Don't ask me questions!" thundered the landlord. "What devilment has your ruffian been up to now?"

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"Yer can see me fice," said the rags laconically. "I fetched 'im out of the pub, and when 'e got me in the street 'e thrashed me, an' the copper nabbed 'im. It waren't my fault. I'll get a fresh 'idin' when 'e comes out."

"Daresay you'll deserve it! You folks are all alike. If you only knocked yourselves about it wouldn't matter. But you knock my property about, and then rush the rent. I pay rates and taxes for a set of loafers!"

"The 'ouse is took care on," averred the woman. "Yer can see for yerself."

They entered one of the tenements. The room was forlornly bare, but clean. On a ragged mattress in one corner lay an emaciated girl, with the face of an aged woman.

"What's wrong with the child?" asked Inkersley, dragging Hamlet back towards the door.

"Typhy fever," replied the mother.

"Got the doctor?"

"Yes, sir, an' 'e says a Monday she can get to work agen."

"Get to work again! that clay-coloured skeleton."

Inkersley groped in his pocket. He chinked something yellow into the woman's tallow-like hand.

"Take that," he said, exactly as though he were giving her a blow. "I'll tell parson Benedict to look round, and what you need you can have. And if you go blabbing to your neighbours—" he shook his fist in her poor bloodied face—"I'll fire you out on the spot. Mind now, I'll do it! I mean what I say!"

"Yes, sir, thank yer sir, an' God bless yer!" said the rags, shedding dirty tears of joy. "I knew as yer wouldn't act 'ard to me. An' God bless yer little un too! May 'e grow up to be as good an' Christian as 'is pa. There aint many like yer in this wicked world, Mr. Inkersley!"

"To exercise charity is one of the rich hypocrite's chief luxuries, Hamlet," said the landlord as he hoisted his son back into the carriage. "But it is a very expensive form of sport. That property ought to yield me fourteen per cent net; and I don't get five out of it."

"But why do you have such nasty dirty houses, father?" queried the child.

"Your uncle William bought them. They belong to him. They even bear his name."

"But, father, he's dead!"

"In his property he still lives. I dare not sell it."

Through grimy lanes, they arrived at a

long forsaken street. Several railway bridges, dank and dripping, spanned it at intervals like iron gates of death. On either side were to be observed shops stocked with strange toys. In some coffins exhibited themselves, in various stages of manufacture. In others were crosses, crucifixes, panoplied Mothers-of-God, saints and martyrs bleeding oleographic vermilion down scrolls of glazed paper. In the majority, wreaths of immortelles dangled, and artificial flowers were potted under domes of glass and caged in galvanized wire, as though they might blow away. The whole region, smoke-smear'd, rain-driven, sun-bleached—wore the weeds of proletarian mourning. It was sprouting into that weird vulgarity, that false and sickly prettiness, which makes more piteous the sepulture of the working classes. There hung about the shop-fronts an atmosphere, there arose from them an effluence, distinctive and familiar, but not describable by any current adjectives. The age of avarice makes mourning a branch of trade, and its adjuncts a department in the hardware line. The fact is advertised in Catafalque Road, Grimville.

The carriage reached a park-looking enclosure, cresting a hill. To the mystified child this quaint pleasance, showing gleams of marble through its heavy railings, seemed

the end of all things. They had passed through a valley of the shadow of death, and come out upon the edge of the world. Leaving one vasty pylon in their wake, they stopped before a second. It had acquired a specious antiquity—the rottenness of age without its dignity. Plaster had crumbled from the colossal arch and left the brick-work bare in patches. They alighted and entered.

“What is this, father?” asked Hamlet.

“This is the cemetery, my son. The slaves call it the bone-yard. Here we all betake ourselves, one by one.”

“To be buried?”

“Yes. The slave-owners are placed in expensive coffins, and handsome monuments are erected above them. The slaves are laid in cheap graves, close to the outer wall. Their mates come and hang iron wreaths, and photographs, and other baubles, above them. On the railway people travel first, second, and third class. They enter into the other world in much the same way.

“What makes people die, father?”

“Various causes. Generally speaking, the slaves die of too little food and too much beer. The owners die of too much food and too little exercise. Death is an equal boon to both classes, though neither think so.”

They mounted to a terrace fronting the mortuary chapel, just within the gates, and sat down upon a bench under the shadow of the building. Below, beyond a parapet, lay an ocean of graves. Thousands of monuments shone white against the greenness of yews, and cypresses, and weeping-willows, and rank churchyard grass.

"Why did we come through this door," questioned Hamlet, indicating the gateway by which they had entered, "instead of the other one?"

"The other was the dissenting graveyard. We are church people."

"But why aren't they all buried together?"

"If they were mixed up they might get into the same heaven. And then it would be heaven no longer."

"How many heavens are there then?"

"Seven."

"And which shall we go to?"

"The seventh, of course. It is the first-class Church heaven."

"And where will the slaves go to?"

"The first. The nonconformists, who are usually middle-class folk, and original thinkers, will make their own arrangements in the five flats between."

"What are nonconformists, father? Mr. Benedict is always preaching about them."

"They are people who have a wonderful conscience, my dear."

"But Mr. Benedict says they don't believe in the Prayer Book nor the Catechism?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what *do* they believe in?"

"Well, they believe in the late Mr. Gladstone, and co-operative stores."

"Mr. Benedict says only people who believe in God will go to heaven."

"Ah! and that is what I think too. But then I'm twenty-five years behind the times. Now-a-days they decide these matters by parliamentary majorities—and vaccination."

Graves. Thousands of graves. Monuments of all patterns, of all prices, of all materials. Avenues, terraces, crescents, of sepulchres. In the distance catacombs, gaping dumb black mouths to the sunlight. Inkersley led his boy slowly through the mazes of Necropolis. He ambled and he halted, with the fond dalliance of proprietorship. He gloated on the spoils of death as on his own particular appurtenance.

"Does this place belong to you, father?" enquired Hamlet.

"Partly. I have shares in it, as well as perpetual graves for fourteen persons. They are brick-lined, and of extra depth."

"I don't like it." The boy pulled disuasively at his father's hand.

"'Tis a peaceful spot; you must learn to like it. Come, now, I will show you something pretty. You have heard how men's future is told by the palm of their hand?"

"Doris is always telling hers with a pack of cards. She says a Queen of Diamonds is followed by a Knave of Hearts, and she's the Queen of Diamonds, and the Knave of Hearts will be her sweetheart."

"Oh, ho! She says that, does she? I must look out for the Knave! But I'm thinking more of Spades just now. Now listen; just as you can tell a man's future by his palm, so you can tell a body's past by its tombstone, without even reading the inscription."

"You can't!"

"But I can."

"Well, do it then!"

"I will then. You see that great pink stone there. I say it belongs to a town-manufacture. I say he was a town-councillor, very fat, very rich, a great money-grubber, a great hypocrite. I say he wore a thick gold watch-chain, and a big top-hat on Sundays when he went to chapel, where he sat in a front seat and often handed the plate. I say he had fingers like toes, and snorted to himself as he walked to and from his office. He lived at Mammon's Heath, where he had a very ornate villa, and a

large greenhouse full of pelargoniums; and he died of apoplexy, something over seventy years of age. Now come and read what it says."

With labour and much help, the child lisped out the inscription:

" In Respectful Memory
 of
 Simon Pennyman Stone,
 Late Alderman of this City
 and
 Founder
 of
 The Zion Stone Memorial Chapel
 who
 Died suddenly
 but
 Not Unprepared
 at
 Mammon's Heath
 on
 —th — 18—, aged 72 years.
 Erected by his Clerks and Hands.
 ' For ever with the Lord.'
 ' Take him for all in all he was a man,
 We ne'er shall look upon his like again.' "

" Ho, ho, ho ! " laughed Inkersley. " Not look upon his like again ! No, let us hope not ! the miserable sweater ! He once turned a consumptive employé out into the street for a debt of thirty-four shillings, after the man had served him and his father thirty-five years ! You see, Hamlet,

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I prophesied true, did I not? The son is Councillor Jabey Stone, and a chip of the old block!"

"There aren't any chips," said the child, scanning the mass of granite critically. "It's brand new."

"Ah, you can't see the chips, Hamlet. They are taken out from below, and stone has begotten stone."

"Oh," said Hamlet, in a mist.

"Now look at that tablet yonder—the white marble one, with gold letters, and rose bushes planted at the foot. A young girl rests there. She was an only daughter, and not more than eighteen. She was tall, slender, delicate, and fond of painting flowers. Her parents took her to the south of England every spring, on account of her weak chest; but in vain. Come, now, and read."

Hamlet's endeavours were recompensed as follows:

"In Ever Loving Memory
of
Cecilia
The Only and Treasured Child
of
—— and ——
Taken from the arms of her Heart-broken Parents
at
Torquay
1st June, 18—
Aged 17 years.
'The maiden is not dead but sleepeth.'"

Inkersley clapped his hands in grim triumph. "I told you so!" he cried.

"You've read it before!" said Hamlet.

"Never. You see, it hasn't been erected three months. It is a year since I last came here."

"Then how could you tell?"

"Easily as winking. Look, boy; the tablet is an image of the girl as she was in life—tall, slender, and as white as snow. See how the alabaster is fretted on the top, at the corners, at the base, like little frills for neck and wrists and ankles; like a starched robe; like the nightgown of a petted child, an invalid, who spends most of its time in bed. The gilded letters and rails show that nothing was too good for the idol. The roses planted above her bosom commemorate her love of flowers. Believe me, Hamlet, our character goes with us to our grave, and sits above our dust forever. I could write Cecilia's innocent history from that slab of virgin marble, so like herself: how she went to church each Sunday morning, and sang hymns at home at night; how she attended little birthday parties; dressed in white muslin, but was always fetched away at dusk; how her canary died, and she wept herself ill over it; how she received lessons from a daily governess, whose chief dread

was that she might offend the angel. I could write out an inventory of the relics that she left, and her parents still cherish—a paint-box, a stamp album, a birthday-book, a prayer-book, a Bible; her gloves, her handkerchiefs embroidered with a large C, her little evening slippers, the tiny watch her father gave her on her fifteenth birthday; saddest of all, the empty brass bird-cage she grieved over, prophetic symbol of two empty lives and a desolate home. All, all are printed there between the lines.”

“I don’t like it,” said the child hazily.

“But it is good for you to learn these things,” replied the father. “Sentiment must have its proportionate place in all sound education.”

He led the boy to an oval space planted around with cypress trees. They sheltered a mighty sepulchre. Granite steps led up to a mass of masonry surmounted by a broken column of white marble. The whole was enclosed by iron chains having huge spiked links. It was as though it had been wished to lay the sleeper under a load immovable, and fetter him down beyond the possibility of resurrection.

Inkersley doffed his hat, whether in reverence or because the heat was torrid, and vacantly dabbed his forehead with a silk bandana.

"What a big tombstone," said Hamlet;
"it is like a little house!"

"Yes. An empty house."

"Whose grave is this, father?"

"Read what it says, my son."

The lettering, toilsomely spelt out by Hamlet, was all too familiar to the parent. It ran:

"In Affectionate Remembrance
of
William Inkersley
Who was Taken Away from an Unfinished Task
and
A Circle of Deeply Sorrowing Friends
on
the —— day of —— 18—
At the Early Age of Forty-one Years,
Leaving a Noble Example of Perseverance,
Self-Sacrifice, and Integrity, to them
and to his Kindred,
By Whom
This Monument is Erected.
'Who being dead yet speaketh.'"

"Why does he have such a big tombstone, father?" asked Hamlet.

"Because he deserved it. A great mind merits a great monument."

"But why is that pillar thing broken? It spoils all the lot. It ought to be mended."

"It is purposely left broken, because poor William's life was broken. It must not be mended, because we cannot recall the past."

"What a pity!"

"All monuments should be pictures of the dead. They are an interesting study. They have their names, and they ought to have their proper meanings. That yonder"—he pointed between the cypress trees—"is a cinerary urn; and that is a truncated pyramid; and that a pyramidal obelisk; and that a sarcophagus; and that a Greek cross; and that a Latin cross; and that a Celtic cross."

The child pointed to the uncouth monstrosity commemorating Uncle William. "But what is this thing called?" he questioned.

The father hesitated, taken aback. "This thing?" he repeated, with lips that stuck together, and parted irregularly; "this thing—? Well, this is a cenotaph my child."

"Cenotaph, cenotaph, cenotaph," murmured the boy beneath his breath, eager to acquire a fresh noun. "Cenotaph—what a funny word!"

"The world is full of funny things, Hamlet," expounded Inkersley, in a curious forced voice, "though few see them, simply because they don't look for them. Grown-up people call the funny things mysteries. I am a mystery, and you are a mystery; these dead around here are greater mysteries, and your uncle William is the greatest mystery of all. Life itself is a mystery. I have been twenty-five years trying to find out whence I came

and whither I am going. And I know no more than you. No one knows. Old men, with long hair and yellow teeth and spectacles, watch the stars of the sky through telescopes, and the grubs of the earth through microscopes, year after year, generation after generation, only to find out whence they came and whither they go. They call themselves scientists, which means people who know things. Yet they know nothing. They write enormous books, full of hard words; and the books are waste paper. They argue and squabble together. They add long strings of titles to their names. Yet they die like beggars of the streets, and return to the same dust. They know no more than I know. Nay, they know less than you know"; he lifted the child in his arms and kissed him; "for you have been only eight years upon this muddled stage; you can still hear angels' voices—"

"No I can't!" said Hamlet, in prompt disclaimer. "I never heard one!"

Inkersley laughed, and set the child down. "Well, you might," he said. "Perhaps some day you will."

A hoarse roaring sound rose from among the chimney-stacks afar off, and mounted to a whooping whistle that could be heard for miles.

"The Steam Cock," exclaimed Inkersley,

"crowing noon! How often has it called me from bed on dull grey mornings in the years gone by. Ah, happy years gone by! How many of these sleeping slaves have risen to it and plodded off to work, with their tin coffee-can, and their bread and bacon wrapped in newspaper. They cannot hear it now. They will never hear it more."

"Mr. Benedict says that dead people will hear the Great Trumpet."

"I wonder. Perhaps they will. And what a shame! They toiled, sinned, suffered, died. May they not rest? Shall a louder cock-crow call them from their one real sleep? Cruel to drag the toil-worn from his sleep!"

"But, father, tell me really and truly, why do people have to die?"

"Because they are tired out. To-night, after you have romped and played, you will lie down gladly in your little cool cot. So, when men and women have toiled and played out the daylight of their life, they lie down peacefully in their cold bed here. There is nothing to be afraid of. I shall come here too; and gladly—gladly."

"But not for a long while yet?"

"When my day is over and my work is done."

They left the cemetery and made for a

confectioner's where Hamlet's "drives around" invariably terminated in custards or ice-creams. The sultry streets were thick with midday crowds. Men of business hurried to and fro. Portly mothers piloted strings of children through the living streams. Cigarette-puffing clerks ogled summer girls clad in ethereal frocks of all imaginable tints. The silent avenues of Necropolis had given place to the populous paths of Cosmopolis. "But they are only waiting," muttered Inkersley to himself. "They forget their mute friends sleeping under sun and shower. Yet all will join them, one by one."

At the children's party that night Inkersley gave himself over completely. He became a child. He was blind man. He was Tom Tiddler. He was a witch who told fortunes. He was a tiger, a hearth-rug wound around him, and the perspiration pouring from his forehead. He was simply adorable. Little boys climbed up his legs, and hammered him with baby fists to show their love. Little girls dragged him to his knees and stifled him with sticky kisses. 'Twas Gulliver among the Liliputians. They laid him on the carpet, and rolled over him in screaming heaps. They macerated him into a dusty pulp. They stormed

and they raided him, till they could storm and raid no more; till little limbs grew weary, and little heads were heavy, and the last of them were led away.

Then he went back to the empty parlour with its out-of-date trappings; its vases full of quaking-grass, its ormolu clock under a glass shade, its crochet-work antimacassars strewn about the cabbage-rose carpet. The air was redolent of children's party: eau de Cologne, scented soap, and chocolate-creams, had left a blend to which the dust gave thickness. He viewed himself in a mirror whose sconces trickled coloured wax upon the floor. His necktie had disappeared. His collar hung by one stud. His shirt had ceased to show a front. And as he stood there the light died from his eyes, and the smile peeled off like a fucus from his face. "My last fling but one," he muttered. "The silver wedding next."

VI.

If Mr. Inkersley was enamoured of his gloomy domicile the sentiment was certainly not shared by his family. They hated it. They despised it. They were ashamed of it. They fretted against it as against a prison. They had acquaintances who were approached through bowery avenues, who were housed in machicolated villas with plate-glass windows, who were surrounded by rockwork walls, and separated from common people by castellated gates. Vaguely convinced that the paterfamilias was wealthy, they craved to be as such ; and to be as such they must needs be lodged as such. They yearned for things modern—or antique, which was it ? They could not quite have told ; but a dim conviction that they ought to be surrounded by what was “aesthetic,” or “high art,” or “decorative,” or something of the kind, possessed them powerfully ; and the old house kept them down. It spoilt everything they did, and thwarted everything they aspired to. Uninherited antiquity is merely dull, and the out-of-dateness of Denmark Lodge weighed

oppressively upon its occupants. It laid a spell upon its occupants. It smote them with dowdiness incurable. Everything was dismally in keeping. The building dictated its appointments, and those appointments imbued with their spirit a mother, seven daughters, and a little boy. Moving between wall-papers, sitting upon chairs, sleeping under bed-hangings, walking upon carpets, all thoroughly "old-fashioned," the family, by distressing enchantment, remained "old-fashioned" also. The fact was undeniable, and it galled them sore. Their very splendour of attire was behind-the-times. It was a splendour of mauve and magenta and vermilion and emerald green; of muslins and sashes and buckles and jet beads. They wondered at themselves, and they repined. Hungry for shallow frivolity *fin de siècle*, they bore the stamp early Victorian. Their home and furniture were out of vogue; and so were their dress and manners. Conscious of their own shortcomings, they laid the blame on Denmark Lodge and its proprietor. They were an ill-used family, groaning under the gentlest tyrant who ever bore the name of father.

As the drought continued the stuffiness of the old house grew more unbearable, the discontent of its womankind more rampant, and the debility of its master more alarming.

A cry for salt water went up. The mother found herself dying of asphyxia, and nothing but sea-breezes could restore her to respiration. The girls were declared to show symptoms of anæmia, and Hamlet to be in danger of melting into air. Only ozone could set them right. Dr. Dolling was secretly approached, was artistically corrupted, was primed up to tackle the root of evil in the person of Mr. Inkersley. If the head of the family could be temporarily transplanted to some health-resort the ice of contumaciousness would be broken, and total eradication from the hated and haunted house might be ultimately accomplished.

The doctor entered upon the work of persuasion with tact and zeal. "Mr. Inkersley," he said, after feeling his way so far, "you have not taken a change of air all the years I have attended you."

"I have not taken a change of air," answered Mr. Inkersley, "for a quarter of a century."

"It is simply madness."

"Everyone knows I am mad. It is my one claim to be interesting."

"You need not be selfish. You might at least consider your family."

"My family can take a change of air without me. They always do."

"That was not my meaning."

"They are well provided for."

"No orphans are well provided for."

"Tush! they can take good care of themselves. They rule me with a rod of iron as it is. I am simply a toad under a harrow!"

"Your little boy—would you like to leave him fatherless?"

Inkersley meditated in silence. The doctor felt that he had scored one. "An only boy," he said after awhile, "deprived of a father's guidance, is to be pitied if poor; doubly to be pitied if rich."

"You touch me in my tenderest spot," said Inkersley, "and with some reason. But like all surgeons you are cruel in your probings."

"Cruel only to be kind."

"Cruel, as always, to no purpose."

"Is it 'to no purpose' to save a brain and body from destruction, and several young children from abandonment?"

"If the course you recommended could possibly produce the result you count upon I would pursue it."

"For a certainty it could and would; and if you are wise it will."

"Oh, doctor, doctor—you little know!"

"What do I not know?"

"The idleness of your prescription," answered the patient coldly.

"It is capable of curing you."

"A change of air?"

"A change of air."

"You don't understand me."

"Better than you think."

Again Inkersley reflected. "And how long would this wonder-working holiday have to be?" he asked.

"Two months."

"Two months!"

"To really do you good."

"Two months! Two months in a horrible boarding-house, where everyone is public property! Two months looking out on a dreary beach crawling with trippers! It would be the death of me!"

"It might prove the saving of you."

"Dolling, you don't grasp the case! You are fond of proverbs: one man's meat is another man's poison. To me a seaside resort is the very quintessence of all that is hateful in the hateful England of to-day. Vulgaritv, snobbery, ignorance, are bad enough at work in the town; let loose on the shores of the glorious sea they are simply terrifying."

"All physic is bitter and all surgery is painful."

Inkersley vituperated on unheeding:

"Nigger-minstrels bawling balderdash; bathing machines full of sloppy human bodies; brakes full of shop-assistants,

smoking vile tobacco, and joking in viler English; pleasure boats full of puking women and children; piers full of dressed up clerks and milliners; food full of dead flies, and beds full of fleas. Every form of modern atrocity curdled into masses, seething and reeking—! and for two months—! sixty-one or sixty-two days—! Oh Dolling, my dear Dolling, have some pity!"

"I can only order what I know to be right," said the doctor sulkily. "The responsibility of rejecting treatment rests with you."

"For the inside of a week I might—I just possibly *might* bring myself to endure it."

"Even that would be better than nothing."

"Six days, from a Monday to a Saturday—I *might*. As you say, for the sake of the children."

"If you go," said the doctor, "you will live to thank me. If you stay, be the consequences on your own head."

"Well, I will really consider it."

And he really did consider it, throughout that whole day. Perambulating the mossy paths of the old back garden, stretched on the old green velvet sofa in the dining-room, crouched in the old leather-covered chair in the library, in every sequestered spot, in

every possible and impossible attitude, he racked and tortured his brains on that great and fateful question: Whether for the space of six days and six nights he dared relinquish Denmark Lodge in favour of a first-class seaside hotel.

He began to grow fond of the notion. He yielded himself to coquet with it, as with a new idea, dangerous, desperate, yet captivating. It opened up a whole gallery of other new ideas; and new ideas are also new hopes.

Paradox wrestled with reason, and temptation strengthened its claws.

Supposing the doctor should be right—the stupid, healthy-minded, trite-thinking doctor—and himself, the experienced old cynic, wrong? It was unimaginable, and yet possible; for philosophically, nothing is impossible. True, all analogy condemned the hypothesis. True, the history of human action demonstrates that “a sane mind in a sane body” is the watchword of all that is crass, cruel, superstitious, bigoted, unsightly, unchristian, in those dreary annals; whilst what few medallions of glory illuminate them were painted with the tears of the scoffed-at, the blood of the outlawed. True, the maniac is frequently a genius grown too tall, just as the criminal is usually a philanthropist born too soon. Granted that the common herd

devastate through coarseness of touch, and persecute through dullness of sight; given—in a word—that healthy-minded people are swine wallowing in the mire, there are still exceptions in proof of every rule. Blessed exceptions! Excellent individuals! O that Dr. Dolling might turn out to be one!

A thrilling hope, a hope such as he had not known for half a lifetime, took possession of the heart of Herbert Inkersley. And it welled, sweet, fresh, palpitating, from the fountain of that new idea: six days (he might even make them more) in the horrors of a boarding-house on the brink of the sea. Ah, at what cobwebs will the falling clutch!

Flirting with the dangerous notion, and in cultivation of its attendant hope, he went out at time of sunset to the park behind the house. As already stated, this park had once been the private domain of Denmark Lodge. It was the very abomination of Inkersley's soul. But it exhibited, on fine summer evenings like the present, so many features of seaside "atrociousness" that, on this occasion only, he actually sought the spot he "held accursed ground." In its crude vulgarities he might acclimatize himself, by degrees, to the hatefulness of beaches swarming with excursionists. Park to-day, more park to-morrow. And so on.

He found the seaside elements in full


operation. From a painted kiosk in the centre the tubes of the Grimville police-band pumped squirts of brassy discord in odd directions, conveying to the mind a suggestion of verdegriis moistened with spittle. From tennis-courts somewhere to the right came the pat-pat of balls, and the ejaculations of players. On all sides accumulated clusters of those noisy lads and wenches who work by day for very small wages, and spend their leisure hours in aiming at a witticism that never never comes to pass.

He wandered awhile, in a state of irritation and disgust, among the idlers. He noticed that at his approach the several knots of merry-makers were stricken with silence, and many of the young men raised their hats respectfully. This alarmed and pained him. He took it as a personal reproach. Why should he be a wet blanket on their mirth? How came he known to them all? It did not occur to him, that he who has been sowing seeds of human kindness half his life will bear a reputation sacred and revered, though he has sown the seeds in darkness. His career he considered to have ended five-and-twenty years ago, just where it should have begun. He had retired from work, from play, from usefulness, and buried himself within himself. He had nailed the panoply

of his life to the walls of an old suburban villa, just as one might hang up a rich garment in a musty closet, to be marred by mildew and eaten by moths. A generation had grown to manhood and womanhood whilst he had cankered on in his pessimism. But his name, in spite of himself, had not cankered. He wist not of it, but "Old Inkersley" was famous in Grimville although he spurned all popularity, loved, because whilst never harming man, woman, or child, he had lavished secret benefactions far and near. He had needed but to stand up and make a speech, to be adored. He would have died first.

Vexed and worried, he withdrew to a quiet spot where the music sounded faint and no pleasures were. There he sank down upon a bench beneath the wreckage of an ancient oak. From behind him, along an avenue of elms gone black and scraggy through years of smoke, the setting sun rolled a flood of murky gold. Before him, beyond the band-stand, beyond the tennis-courts, above the intervening tree-tops, loomed the upper portion of his own dilapidated home; and there his sight fixed itself.

The house is very lofty; quite tower-like it looks by this deceptive light, standing, as it does, alone. Capping the fabric there is



an attic storey, a cumbrous superstructure of rough red tiles and time-blackened lead. Its squat crooked windows, shuttered close, and partially sunk beneath a stone-coped parapet, shrink from observation guiltily, like the eyes of a murderer. To-night they wear a wicked cruel expression. They sparkle and they gleam; for that upper floor, and that only, catches the last splendour of the west. The parapet, with its crumbled dressings, the thick rough tiles, the quaintly massed smoke-flues, are bright with melancholy gold, and stand out, strident, from the infinite purple of the sky. And the four dormer windows, those leaded, latticed, shrinking, squinting peep-holes, flash and glitter, and glitter and flash, like something evil and precious; like clusters of stolen jewels; like diamonds, dropped by a fugitive thief in his flight, and smouldering undiscovered in the dust of ages.

Mr. Inkersley gloated upon those lights in fixed absorption. They dazzled his eyes, and they benumbed his brain. With basilisk stare they struck him powerless, immovable. They held him mesmerized until their fires burnt out and left them sightless squares, cobwebby and unwashen. He had forgotten the time, the place, the reason of his being there. He had forgotten himself and Dr. Dolling, and his wife and daughters and

Hamlet, and the seaside project. He had forgotten his newborn hope and his stillborn felicity in the contemplation of one prodigious Fact.

But, as the flames faded away, a second influence began to dawn upon his mind. Chill air will rouse us from the deepest sleep, and chill darkness crept into his waking dream. He felt something behind him, something that drew him magnetically, something ominous and human. He turned his head suddenly, and a hand of ice gripped his heart.

At the end of the vista of elm trees, framed by their ancient boles, poised as at the mouth of a tunnel, marked hard on the flush of the afterglow, stood two male figures in close colloquy. At such distance they appeared to be dolls, or mannikins worked by wires, or human beings seen through a minifying glass. But that broad luminance, dwarfing their persons, magnified their individuality; to see was to identify. Of the twain, one was heavy, tawny, reposeful; the other skimpy, black, feverish. Nothing could be heard, but all could be understood. They faced each other, and gesticulated in argument. They brought their heads together in eager whispering. They jumped apart, and trembled against the rosy light in laughter. Suddenly the

black figure began to dance like a jubilant baboon. Raising a skimpy arm, it motioned triumphantly towards Denmark Lodge. The hand remained pointed to the dormer windows.

A coarse mist spun itself before the eyes of Herbert Inkersley; his nostrils opened, and something in his stomach turned round. He staggered aside among some bushes. The turf at his feet rose up, and smote him in the face.

VII

Again a Sunday. Again Phoebus, that patient god, arose and claimed the Sabbath hours his own. His pallid fingers rent away the curtains of the night, and scattered the shreds of darkness in victorious scorn. His giant smile widened, a slit of silver, in the eastern clouds, and breathed forth gusts of gold upon the works of man. The works of man—he made them shameful by his splendour: soot-caked chimneys, black canals, yawning tunnels, crinkled roofs, plastered fronts. The works of man—alas, the works of man! He glared upon them all; upon the broken panes of stealthy attics; upon the plate-glass of lofty gin-palaces; upon the burnt-out matches and cigar-ends in the gutters; upon the Saturday vomit of the pavements. He flashed at the windows of pert villas, and etched out the ragged brickwork of festering rookeries. He reached the bald streets of a third-rate suburb of Grimville, and touched with fire the bright brass knocker of a bright green door. He laid bare the name of Mr. Samuel Pickrell on a highly burnished plate beneath. He

perforated the muslin shades of a bedroom window just above, and summoned Mr. Samuel Pickrell from his dreams.

“ ‘ Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,

And rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race,’ ”

intoned Mr. Samuel Pickrell. “ Let us arise, Selina, and commence the Lord’s Day with prayer. ‘ This is the day which the Lord hath made.’ ”

“ ‘ We will rejoice and be glad in it,’ ” responded Selina from the depths of the bedclothes.

Mr. Samuel Pickrell arose and washed his face. Mrs. Samuel Pickrell arose and washed her face. Shortly afterwards Mr. Samuel Pickrell sat down opposite his spouse to eggs and bacon, tea and toast—the Man in Black.

If rejubilation be the burden of that Sabbatical song whose key-note we have already heard struck, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Pickrell apparently judged that its full melody came best from inner Pickrells replenished with food. They ate and drank, greedily, swiftly, noisily, for a considerable time, before bursting into praise. At length the bacon-fat, which they absorbed with loud smacking sounds, did its work. The springs of gratulatory

joy were loosed, and righteousness found speech.

"The Lord has wrought very graciously to usward, Selina," Mr. Pickrell exulted, licking the grease from his thin lips.

"He 'as not forsaken His good and faithful servants," agreed Selina, watching butter dissolve into her toast.

"The Lord has abundantly blessed our provision."

"And satisfied His poor with bread." Mrs. Pickrell conveyed toast to her mouth with buttery fingers.

"In one particular only has He withheld His lovingkindness, and shut His ears unto our prayer; no little olive branches decorate our 'umble board."

"It is indeed a sore affliction." Down the chin of Mrs. Pickrell melted butter ran like tears.

"Had we been poor and in misery, we should 'ave found therein whereof to joy" (he pronounced it "jy").

"But as things are—"

"As things are, Selina, we 'ave none to follow where we've trod, and our little savings will return again unto the ungodly. We brought nothing into this world, and, unfortunately, we can carry nothing out."

"True, Samuel, too true; then why labour on?" Mrs. Pickrell sighed heavily,

and wiped the tears of butter from her mouth.

"In a few weeks I 'ope we shall find rest from our labours. There remains but to put one little corner-stone, as it were, upon our savings, and then—"

"And then we shall retire to a little country 'ome, and live our latter days in peace."

"And godliness, Selina."

"Of course—peace and godliness. There are never lacking opportunities for doing good. I can nurse the sick poor, and you, Samuel, can prescribe for them. A little business won't come amiss. We needn't stand all the day idle."

"By no means, Selina. I shall, moreover, commence some prayer meetings for the benefit of 'ungry souls. Not unto no purpose did the Lord give over the ungodly into our 'ands. As unto his own elect people, He gave us vineyards we planted not, and wells we 'adn't dug."

"And like his own elect people we did right to spoil the Egyptians."

"It was our duty" (he pronounced it dooty) "to spoil them. And we did our duty without shirking. Therefore are we blessed with plenty. Inkersley alone has been as gold and silver and precious stones unto us."

"Ah!—that Man of Sin!" Mrs. Pickrell shuddered quite prettily. "That prey to an evil conscience! That unfolded sheep!"

"Well, we've done with him now," said Mr. Pickrell ruefully. "He has withdrawn his tithe from the Lord's servants. It's the last drop in the cup of his iniquity." He swayed his teacup in an illustrative manner.

"The way of the ungodly shall perish!" said Mrs. Pickrell sternly.

Now it so happened that ungodliness incorporate was balancing itself at the very portal of our longsuffering friends, and overshadowing the name upon its burnished plate. That identical knocker which the finger of the god of day had touched and heated had been the load-star of a huge and heavy figure, clad in a shabby dress-suit that a shabby dust-coat left painfully in evidence, and topped by a tall hat that appeared to have been brushed the wrong way. From some dark den of infamy the shape had crept out with the dawn. It had swayed itself slowly onward from the centre of the town, and in the full glare of the morning it darkened the holy threshold under consideration, just as the Lord's servants within had concluded their frugal meal of eggs and bacon, tea and toast.

The knocker spoke very loudly and very regularly. With his wife at his heels, Mr.

Samuel Pickrell opened the door, and the man in the dress-suit stumbled into his arms.

"Mr. Foljambe! My friend!" exclaimed the chemist.

"Yes, that is my name."

"But in that clothing—! Where *have* you been?"

"Out for the night," answered Foljambe, with a laugh that ended in a hicup. Plainly he spoke truth. His large round face was flabby, and thick with bristles. His eyes were gummy. He was greasy and unwashed. His clothes exhaled the staleness of strong liquor and cigars. "Don't stand gaping like a fool!" he said, noting the chemist's dismay. "Give us something to cure a headache. Then we'll talk business."

"But on such a day, and at such an hour!" moaned Mr. Pickrell; "and under the eye of the public! What *will* people think?"

"Pish, pish!" said Foljambe. "Then if you're ashamed of your pals let's get inside! The eye of the public can't see through bricks, eh? How do, Mrs. Pickrell? Didn't notice you. Sorry."

He staggered past that horrified matron, and into the little parlour.

"Get citrate of magnesia, Selina," said Mr. Pickrell, in accents of despair; "and

then nip round to Sunday School. I may be late; I'm *bound* to be late."

Foljambe settled into the roomiest of the arm-chairs, as though he meant to stay. Mrs. Pickrell, having supplied him with a tall and fizzing libation, withdrew. Mr. Pickrell, wild with impatience, danced around his untimely guest like a monkey on hot cinders. He seemed to have springs under his long elastic-side boots.

Foljambe watched him with unconcealed contempt whilst drinking the magnesia. "Bah! what's the hurry?" he belched, setting down the empty glass. "What a jumping-jack you are, Pickrell!"

"My dear friend—!" wailed Mr. Pickrell; "on the Sabbath morn—! at such a hour—! What *will* the neighbours say?"

Foljambe merely laughed; a slow gelatinous laugh.

"It's my turn to offer up prayer at the Room," pleaded the chemist, "and my dear wife has to preside at the 'armonium! Our united presence is absolutely indispensable!"

"Rot!" said Foljambe. "Give it a rest for once!"

"A rest—? The Sabbath rest, Mr. Foljambe—"

"Stash it, old man!" said the intruder. "I'll be brief. I want money."

Mr. Pickrell waltzed about with increased energy, and wrung an imaginary wash-leather.

"We're both in the same boat," urged Foljambe.

"It is true, my friend—"

"We're on halves in the marriage venture. All's fair and square. If I can't get about to spoon the girl, what the devil's to happen? You'll lose what you've put in already, and you'll get nothing out. Is that business, eh?"

"They're after you again, then?"

"They've locked me out of my digs and stuck to my bags. These togs are all I've got to get around in. I've been two days and three nights in full dress. Can I go courting in a get-up like this?"

"Am I my brother's keeper?" whined Mr. Pickrell.

"I don't want you to claim any relationship with me!" growled Foljambe. "You are my business partner, *sub rosa*. You have that honour."

"But what can I do, Mr. Foljambe?—what *can* I do?"

"Why leave off whimpering, and set me going again, of course. My losses are yours."

"But dear Mr. Foljambe, my means are so 'umble!"

"Bah, bah, bah!"

"And the Lord hath seen fit to deprive me of one source of income."

"Fiddle-de-dee!"

"On my word of honour—"

"Oh, say on your Bible oath!"

"Yes, on my Bible—"

"Hush! Don't perjure yourself by what's holy! Say 'as I'm a gentleman'!"

"Well then, as I'm a gentleman—"

"Ho, ho, ho! ha, ha, ha! he, he, he-e-e!" roared Foljambe.

"Then, as my name's Samuel Pickrell—will that suit you, Mr. Foljambe?—as my name's Samuel Pickrell the Man of Sin has withdrawn his support."

"Tell the marines!"

"It is true, Mr. Foljambe."

"What! Inkersley refuses his blackmail?"

"That unconverted sinner has indeed rebelled, and no longer delivers his tithe for the maintenance of the household of faith."

"I think you're lying, Pickrell."

In reply, Mr. Pickrell danced up to a bureau in the corner, unlocked its lid, extracted a paper from a secret drawer, and danced it into the pulpy hands of the immobile Foljambe.

"Read that!" he said.

Foljambe turned over leaf after leaf of the

document, which was lengthy and closely penned. As he conned it, the ends of his sandy eyebrows crept upwards, and the tips of his sandy moustache sank down. At last he closed the letter, with a smack of his fat palm.

"Well I'm damned!" he said.

"I trust *not*, my friend," said pharmaceutical evangelist in mild expostulation.

Foljambe returned to the letter, as though doubting the reliability of his own bleared eyes. He read it over afresh, ejaculating certain clauses aloud in tones of wondering enquiry: "Circumstances over which neither you nor I nor any human being can exercise control have arisen, and render our former relation to one another as unnecessary to both as it is galling to me Mysterious developments which I dare not commit to paper Phenomena outside the range of finite intelligence You will shortly be in a position to acknowledge the inutility of any longer maintaining this enforced silence It is with feelings akin to regret, that I inform you, after calm calculation of all probable contingencies, that, upon the last night of the coming month, the understanding hitherto observed between you and me finally and permanently terminates itself I propose to celebrate the occasion by a small family

gathering of a festal character, in which I desire your participation By presenting yourself on the date indicated, you will not only learn the reason, and, I am convinced, admit the expediency, of the step I am taking, but will also receive a final recompense for your faithful adherence to the obligation by which you bound yourself so many years ago.'"

"There now, Mr. Foljambe!" said the chemist, with an air of injured innocence.

"It's mere bluff!" said Foljambe, shutting the letter with another smack.

"It's no bluff, Mr. Foljambe. He'll do it, as sure as I'm a Christian!"

"And you?—you'll put the screw on, of course?"

"The screw, my friend, has been on twenty-five years already," lamented the Lord's servant, "and pretty tight too. He might—" Mr. Pickrell drew his hand across his throat significantly. "My work is to cure, not to kill; to save life, not destroy it."

"Oh! I see! Then the girl's our last chance?"

"She might, indeed, prove our last and crowning mercy. But I fear, Mr. Foljambe, you're going to make a mess of it."

"Leave that to me, old boy! Everything has gone on swimming up to date.

She thinks me an Adonis over-the-garden-wall. But I suppose you're going to throw up the sponge for a beggarly fifty quid?"

"I must give the 'ole matter my careful and prayerful consideration, Mr. Foljambe."

Vincent Foljambe, sometime Lieutenant in the Queen's Own Squanderers, spent a quiet day under the holy thatch of Mr. Pickrell, Homœopathic Chemist. The latter, offering up morning prayer among the Brethren, made touching intercession for any poor saints of Grimville whose daily bread might stand threatened with diminution. In his evening discourse, he enlarged eloquently upon the blessings likely to accrue to those who entertain angels unawares. During these sacred hours his guest remained hidden in the back parlour, in company with a lofty jug and a bulky Bible. He was thus supplied, as the chemist beautifully observed, with food and drink in sufficiency; but tobacco was forbidden lest an odour not of sanctity might betray the sojourner's presence. Holy hospitality must be exercised without ostentation. Once Foljambe, faintly curious to discover Mr. Pickrell's age, opened the Bible. It was scored, from end to end, with ruled lines, red, black, and blue, uniting cognate thoughts and precepts. On the

opening fly-leaf was an inscription in the owner's handwriting :

“ Samuel Pickrell, born (naturally)
 29th February, 18—
 ” ” ” ” born (from above)
 1st April, 18—”

He threw the sacred volume aside, with an obscene word and a laugh. “ Really,” he muttered, “ I believe the scoundrel thinks himself a saint. A ranker villain doesn't walk God's earth.”

During such intervals as his ministerial duties left disposable, the chemist confabulated long and deep with his celestial visitant, and even shared its beer. In the starry silence of the small hours the angel once more footed the threshold of the godly, and plumed itself for flight. It bore in the breast of its dust-coat an order to a certain figure upon a certain tailor, and a written authorization to direct certain creditors to a certain druggist's shop in a quiet suburb of the town. Something for present needs clinked sweetly in its trousers' pocket. O the loveliness of charity !

“ Good-by, my friend,” said Mr. Pickrell, wringing his angelic colleague's hand with damp flexible fingers. “ Good-by, Foljambe. God bless you, and keep you, and prosper you! Good luck, in the name of the Lord!”

“ Ta-ta for the present, and good luck to

us both," replied the ex-lieutenant. "We still have a splendid chance. Let me once make myself a member of the family, ha—! It will be like marrying a bank or a gold mine!"

Mr. Pickrell closed, locked, bolted, chained the door. "What a dear fellow Mr. Foljambe is, Selina," he remarked to his help-meet, "although a little wild."

"He is certainly a perfec' gentleman."

"What a victory it would be if we could only bring him in!"

"It would indeed be a brand snatched from the burning."

"Let us unite in prayer for him."




VIII

Mr. Inkersley took no change of air.

His family—with the exception of Prudence, who declined absolutely to leave poor dear father alone—went off to Llandudno without him. They were not less disgusted by his obstinacy than he by his eldest daughter's. He tried to be severe and pretended to be angry with her ; but in vain. Prue was firm, and argument was futile. Two dogged wills had come into conflict, and neither would budge an inch. The father flatly refused to stir from Denmark Lodge. The daughter flatly refused to stir from its master.

The amount of pathos incidental to the annual exodus of the Inkersleys was always amazing, and on the present occasion, the father being ill and the daughter recalcitrant, it waxed positively tragic. Mrs. Inkersley was by natural bias a lady of platitudes. To record her farewells to Herbert, her exhortations on filial duty to Prudence, would be a weary task. All her orations were chorussed by six white-robed choristers possessed of piercing trebles, and her best



epigrams were reiterated solo by a small acolyte endowed with an awful memory and disconcerting powers of imitation. From the blessings invoked, the kisses exchanged, the tears that flowed like water, it might have been a life-long separation. Taken as a whole, it was an immense success. The mother, old-fashioned ever, richly enjoyed a good cry. How could there be a pleasure-trip without tears? The sobbing and the howling were an integral part of the performance. Recurring holiday months were always inaugurated with a debauch of harmless grief. 'Twas a time-honoured custom.

The family were, however, to be away this season a fortnight only. Judged by their equipage, they might have been embarking on a prolonged geographical exploration. They might have been *en route* for Kamtchatka or Timbuctoo. They might have been bound for the end of the earth, never to return.

They carried with them raiment to suit all seasons and all contingencies. They left home in light frocks, straw hats, thin shoes, because the weather was hot. They carried also thick dresses, hats, boots, for fear the weather should turn cold. They were provided with medium dresses, hats, boots, with a view to the weather possibly

becoming temperate. They had Sunday splendours, in which to promenade the pier, and listen to the band. They had cast-offs, adapted to scrambling on the rocks and rantering through the mud. By the magnitude of their combined wardrobe, one might have mistaken them for a theatrical company on tour, or a firm of second-hand clothes dealers changing their address.

The commissariat department was in no way lacking. Such heaps of provender were stowed away in hampers and packing-cases as witnessed to their assumption that in Grimville alone—grimy Grimville, notorious for the badness of its food-supply—could the commonest necessities of life be had for love or money. On the speculation that they might be able to hire a cottage for a fortnight, they set out with victuals to last a month. Everything was there, from the ham for breakfast to the canned tongues for supper. The tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, and lime-juice, would have stocked a temperance-bar. There were even tins of condensed milk.

Lastly, there was a portable drug-store, rich in such delicacies as brimstone-and-treacle, seidlitz powders, quinine-wine, and toothache-tincture. True, the health of the mother and all the girls was quite perfect, and there had never been a decayed

tooth in the family. But then one never knew. And Hamlet frequently over-ate himself. In any case, it was wise to be on the safe side. Forewarned was forearmed, et cetera.

The final adieu was given in chapters, each more exquisitely touching than the one before. The wailing and the fretting, the remembering and forgetting, the watery kisses, the lachrymose smiles, the hysterical laughter, would have done honour to an eternal farewell. Chapter I. was enacted at the gates of Denmark Lodge; Chapter II. in the booking-office of the Cosmopolitan Railway station; Chapter III., on the platform of the same; Chapter IV., through the windows of a reserved compartment. It was a tragedy in four acts, and the closing scene was harrowing in the superlative degree. Mr. Inkersley suffered deep depression, and Prudence a keen sense of guilt, upon this very temporary parting. Both heaved a sigh of relief when the train, flying eight moist pocket-handkerchiefs of various sizes, glided screeching out of sight.

"Well Prue," said Mr. Inkersley, as he entered once more into the damp dark shadows of Denmark Lodge, "here we are again."

"Yes, father," she answered, with a

strange bleating little laugh ; " here we are again."

Does the sand of time at times get clogged, and cease to run ? Do clocks and watches, like other hard-worked people, tire themselves out, and take a rest ? Does this earthly ball, in a fit of universal sulks, stand still upon its axis ? Do the light-winged hours play truant and go off on a picnic, and return to duty only when human weariness has wept itself to sleep ? Assuredly there are days interminable in their weariness, and Prudence found that first day of solitude to be one.

At the beginning of dusk (and at the end of her patience) she went out into the back-garden. She wandered—absently, vacantly—down to its far extremity. She loitered about between a clump of lilac-bushes and a brick wall. It had become her vesper custom to wander—absently, vacantly—down the back-garden, and meditate between the clump of lilac-bushes and the brick wall. To-night no sisters were there to interrupt her cogitations. Small marvel that she loitered earlier, and lingered later, in her brooding spot. Strange that her heart should be beating like a sledge-hammer.

Such a lovely evening. Overhead the sky was deepening from azure to the tint of of blued steel. Stars, faintly glimmering

into life, began to stud the canopy; like silver spangles on a heavenly robe. Small rosy clouds, petals shaken from the scarlet core of sunset, floated out upon the violet depths, and died there, one by one, exhausted by the ecstasy of their own sweetness. Everything green took on the mysterious twilight lustre that ancient stained glass alone has ever caught. At the other end of the garden the old house reared itself in blocks of shadow, its clumped and crooked chimneys edged with quivering gold.

A scene of perfect peace. But alas, the peace of nature is able to ruffle the patience of man, and exasperate impatience in woman. Prudence was suffocating with disappointment, and the tranquility of the sky mocked her. Vexation lashed itself to fury—smothered fury—the worst kind of all. As she wandered—absently, vacantly—back to the detestable old house, there was a great sob gnawing in her bosom. It must not come up, and it would not go down; and it ached, and ached, and ached.

She felt her way into the dining-room, where rage gave place to melancholy unspeakable. Her father was there. He was sitting huddled up upon the favourite sofa, his head in his hands. He was rocking himself to and fro and breathing heavily, as though in pain. In the depth of his reverie

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he appeared not to notice her entrance. About what was he thinking? She shuddered to think.

She groped around for matches. She found them. She lighted all four burners of the mouldy bronze chandelier. But still the room seemed dark. It felt chilly, for all the sultry atmosphere.

She tried to sing to herself, for company, as she moved about doing nothing; but the sound of her own voice frightened her and the words died upon her lips. After closing the door that her eye might not wander out into the cavernous bleakness of the entrance-hall, she sat down, and waited for time to pass. She stared, forlornly, hypnotically, at the globes of the chandelier, till they floated like four fog-blurred suns before her vision. Oh, but she was miserable!

Through the open windows, two or three great woolly moths blundered in. They darted blindly about the room, and dashed themselves, with battering wings, against the globes of the chandelier. One struck Inkersley on the forehead and roused him from his trance.

"Hullo, Prue!" he said, suddenly awakened to his daughter's existence. "What, find it dull, eh? You had better have cleared out with the others. Well, well; let us get some supper."

He strove to speak buoyantly, but it was a lame attempt. She knew that trifles like supper were as nought to him.

Of the two servants, one had accompanied the family on their expedition. The remaining girl Prudence had sent out for the evening. She therefore proceeded to lay the cloth herself, and her father, in an access of ghoulisn jocularitv, insisted on helping her. Then both sat down, and neither ate.

They conversed with weird politeness, leading off with the topics of health and weather as though they had never met before. A horrible sense of stiffness had stolen in between them. They had suddenly become shy of one another. Father and child alike were acting a part. Each was conscious of the other's mask. Neither dare enquire, even mentally, what the other's mask concealed. Both struggled, by ignoring each other's guilt, to divert attention from their own. The intimacy of their relation rendered this farce the more agonizing. They suffered as two naked people might suffer, each compelled by politeness to treat his vis-a-vis according to the conventions of evening dress.

Cerulia's summons at the front-door put a period to a distressing piece of comedy. Prudence rushed to let her in, and kept her talking needlessly a long while at the

foot of the staircase, sending her up to her room at an hour when she herself might reasonably plead sleepiness.

"I am going to bed, father," she said, rubbing eyes that had no signs of sleep in them. "I am dreadfully tired."

"I also am dog-tired," lied the father agreeably. "Just wait a moment. I must lock up, and then we will both turn in."

The locking up ceremonial occupied many moments, during which the master startled the silence of the back-premises with doleful sounds. Gratings, rattlings, thumpings, echoed through the stony recesses of the basement. "One might just as well be in prison, and done with it," murmured Prudence, ready to cry. Alas, that she should be pining in that dark stronghold, and mother and the girls and Hamlet gazing out upon the blue ripples of a phosphorescent sea!

At length the master and his sputtering tallow candle reappeared. He lighted his daughter to the landing as majestically as a lord high chamberlain.

"Good night, father dear," said Prudence, at the door of her bedroom. "I sincerely trust you will sleep well." The politeness of her voice was preternatural.

"Good night, Prudence my child. And many thanks for your company." He spoke with formality that froze.

They did not kiss. *They shook hands!*

With sadness be the fact recorded, but in the interests of history let the truth be told: Prudence, the cheerful, strong-minded, practical Prudence, cried herself to sleep like a naughty child.

Her father had long lost the gift of tears. He did not sleep at all.

He tossed about until his head was a live coal and every pulse in his body throbbing. He rose and paced the floor, clasping a red-hot ear in each hand lest his head should leap from his shoulders. He flung himself upon the bed, and burrowed with his brow in the pillows, as though to rub out images that had burnt themselves upon his eyeballs. Vain effort! Through his brain words thundered, forms and faces rushed, till it seemed molten with the friction; words booming ever lower; shapes looming ever more distinct. At length the resistance of nature broke down. Powerless, sightless, speechless, dawn left him in the stupor that had become his best substitute for sleep.

IX

Prudence awoke rather late.

She leapt from her couch renewed in strength and spirits, the wretchedness of last night quite forgotten. After a vigorous splashing in cold water, and a fragrant fluttering of cool linen, she drew up the Venetian blind, and divided her attention between her back-hair in the hand mirror and the back-garden down below.

The garden was a long, narrow, and irregular plot, extending away behind the house at an angle. Originally it had supplied the vegetables of Denmark Lodge. Long ago, on the alienation of the timbered land from the residence, it had been dignified by an implantation of fruit-trees and bushes, and flowering shrubs. It now lay a-dying—mournfully but picturesquely—in the smoke of encroaching Enlightenment. Some of the trees were reduced to sooty skeletons. Others broke out annually into sporadic vitality. The box edgings had here been trodden out of existence by the feet of infant Inkersleys, and had there grown to scrubby bushes. The perennial

plants had run to weeds. The weeds had spread to thickets. The gravelled paths were crusted with moss, black and oily with the grime of Progress. Life in death, and death in life, had written themselves in horticultural hieroglyphics.

The garden was girdled by a brick wall, and could be entered at the far end from a cart-lane—private in theory, public in practice—which alone separated the shrunken territory of Denmark Lodge from the ornamented railings of Denmark Park. The whole property conveyed the impression of something left by accident, and grotesquely out of place. At the bottom of the garden a swing had been erected for the children. To the right of that stood a dilapidated greenhouse, and to the left a ruinous summer-arbour, buried in ivy as black as ink.

Prudence was contemplating the paradise lost of garden and the paradise regained of park, finding them pretty in the sunny morning, and trying to forget the spires and stacks beyond the yellowing leafage, when, with a spasm of alarm, she decried her father ambling among the bushes down below. Pipe in mouth, he was making his way towards the green-house, peering intently hither and thither among the shrubs; in search, no doubt, of those

predatory urchins who systematically plundered the few productive trees. She finished off her hair-dressing anyhow, slipped on a light tea-gown, bounded downstairs, and out into the garden.

Inkersley had reached the green-house, and had passed inside. She entered in pursuit. He was bending over a certain flower-pot—a large one that stood apart conspicuously. The girl's skin began to scald, and her heart to throb.

"Morning, father dear," she cried shrilly. "Found any robbers?"

He started. Then he came forward to greet her. There was a boyish look of fear in her eyes, and the flush became her beautifully. He took the rosy spotless face between his hands and stroked it. It had the freshness of ripe fruit.

"No robbers; only slugs," he laughed, kissing her on each cheek. She kissed him in return. The strangeness of overnight had wholly vanished.

"Slugs!" she repeated, "and yet the greenhouse is so dry and sunny."

"The place is simply alive with them," he said. "I can't make it out. See here."

He turned aside, tracing pallid snail-tracks with a piece of twig.

Suddenly Prudence felt all the fibres of her body shrink. Her father began to

probe with twig and fingers in the mould of that particular flower-pot—the large one, that stood apart conspicuously. Beneath the pot she could discern a tiny white point projecting.

“It is time for breakfast, father!” she cried, hopping from foot to foot. “I am dying of hunger. *Do* come!”

“Breakfast!” he mumbled. “The very word makes me ill!”

“No wonder you are ill,” she said—“smoking on an empty stomach! It is positively wicked! Come now, do, and get a cup of tea! It will refresh you.”

“Oh, tea me no teas!” he said still probing. “Tea! Scalding blash, in heat like this! Nine o’clock in the morning, and stifling as noon!”

Poor Prudence—what she suffered during those ghastly seconds of suspense! That flower pot not only covered her secret; it sheltered herself. Her nerves, her heart, her soul, had got transplanted thither, leaving her outward body limp and clammy and insensate. At every jab of her father’s divining-twigg a double-edged bistouri was driven into the tenderest recesses of her being. Innocence alone can know such agony of guilt. By outstretched hands, by supplicating eyes, by the appeal of dumb beseeching protest, she strove to lure her

father to the door. But he stuck pitilessly to the fateful pot.

"Years and years that I can remember," he said, "these old plants haven't flowered until now. They were dead sticks. And look at them! Everything dead seems to be coming to life." He spoke as though someone had done him an injury.

The glass-house was ablaze with bloom. Huge bosses, pink, white, scarlet, glared gaudily upon gaunt and leafless stalks.

"It is all your mother's doing," he mumbled on, "and this vile drought. She always *would* pour soap-suds on the old stumps, in spite of my teeth; and like a fond fool, I promised her to look after them for a fortnight. They should have been thrown away long ago. It is unnatural, this refflorescence. It is uncanny. And the hideous colour of the things! Ugh!"

To the terror of Prudence, he laid both hands upon the special pot. His grasp tightens. He is going to move it! A horrible sickness gripped her at the waist, and she could feel her lips turn blue. She glared wildly round for a means of distracting his attention. Poor was the best that she could find.

"Oh, father, father!" she screamed, in tones of desperation, "Look, look, quick! No wonder there are'n't any leaves on

the geraniums! Look at this frightful thing!"

A bloated caterpillar was drawing itself with dignity up one of the brown bare stalks. Inkersley leapt to its destruction.

"Ah! A caterpillar!" he cried gleefully. "We will soon settle him!"

He relieved his spleen in the annihilation of the insect. The slugs were forgotten in a massacre of big game. Woman fell by a serpent; Prudence is saved by a worm.

"But how white you have gone, Prue!" he said, tossing aside the twig, with its nodule of murdered grub. "And how you are panting, child!" He threw his arms around her. "Why, I believe you are going to faint! My amazon turned squeamish! Well, this is a miracle!"

"I can't think what has come over me," murmured Prudence.

"Ah, you should have gone to Llandudno with your mother! But let us get out of this suffocating hole. Come, child."

Most dutifully she obeyed, and strength returned to her joints.

They had covered half the distance back to the house, when Cerulia met them, and warned them that the tea was going cold.

"Excuse me just one moment, father dear," said Prudence, adroitly turning over

the master to the maid; "I must have dropped my handkerchief."

She tripped back to the greenhouse. She tilted aside the terrible geranium-pot. An envelope lay beneath. She pressed it to her lips, then thrust it into her bosom, burying it under the frillings of her peignoir. Then came to pass the strangest thing of all. Extracting a handkerchief from her pocket, she solemnly threw it on the floor and immediately picked it up again. By such salves will men (and even women) soothe their conscience. She overtook her father at the garden-door, something angular pricking at her breast, and a linen lie trembling in her fingers. She offered silent thanks to God.

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Throughout that day Prudence petted her father as only woman can pet man. She hung around him, and chafed herself against him, as a Persian cat chafes itself against its owner. She caressed him with mesmerizing hands. Long supple fingers smoothed down his lank hair, retied his sailors' knot, pinned a posy in his alpaca jacket, mingled cool drink to assuage his thirst, cooked an etherial omelet to tempt his palate. "You promised mother to take care of the old geraniums," she warbled,

"and I promised mother to take care of the old man." In every touch, in every word, in every movement, was femininity unlimited and unconcealed. She shed the subtle scent of girlhood where she trod. A rose too long in bud—a bud hardened by cold winds, had burst to blossom in the night, and its perfume filled the air. She changed her frock three times in the course of ten hours, and each reinvestiture left her in a fresh phase of missishness.

The father was sorely perplexed. He seriously began to wonder whether some of his strange dreams might not have got mixed with his daily bread, and have taken effect as opium does. Four-and-twenty years he had nourished a certain Prudence Inkersley; he ought, in truth, to know her when he saw her. He had watched over her infancy—he was less neglectful then than in these latter days—and he had struggled with her childhood. He had loved, and tacitly admired her. But an indefinable something had always stood between them, and held them apart. The vague repulsion had reached its climax on the evening past. To-day some occult law of reaction had begun to operate. Either his visual sense had enjoyed rehabilitation, or he had found a new first-born. This creature of dimples and blushes, this

bewitching girl, this formidable young lady, was not the old Prudence.

The girl he knew had always appeared to him a young man in disguise. Her voice was high and clear, but she drawled a little, prettily, as comely young men do. She walked with a quick short step, and wore no hair on her forehead. She was tall of stature, strong of arm, masterful in disposition. At about fifteen, she had become mistress of the household. Mrs. Inkersley was nowhere. Her soft-natured pink-and-white sisters obeyed her as implicitly as they revered her profoundly. Rewards and punishments at her hands were accepted as a matter of course, and never questioned. She was absolute. Twelve months ago, on the expulsion of Foljambe, she had been entrusted with the education of Hamlet. In spite of her father's wrath and her mother's hysterics, she had inaugurated her tutelage of the spoilt child by caning him severely. Although the boy worshipped her, the father had never quite got over this act of discipline. More than ever he had found in Prudence the ugly self-righteous severity of the born governess. He discovered the same quality in all her virtues; her excessive neatness; her preference for tight plain frocks, and stiff collars and cuffs; her perfect fidelity to duty; her ceaseless energy;

her extraordinary gift of management; her innate piety; her practice of early-rising; her total disregard of wind and weather. He had been forced to allow, indeed, that under sleety skies Prudence shone brightest. Back from town, in a dripping macintosh he had often likened her to a carnation wet from the shower—fresh fragrant, and unutterably clean. When all womankind were bedraggled by the mire Prue was a pink washed by the rain.

And suddenly she has turned coquette. Grim metamorphosis!"

Mr. Inkersley laid the blame of this—as of everything—on the drought. "It is transmographying nature," he mused within himself. "Dead geraniums have sprouted into flower, and Prudence has bloomed into muslins and blushes. This vile heat has changed rods into nosegays, and a Spartan school-mistress into a flirt Yes, it is not improbable. The weather dictates our dress, and our dress holds subtle dominance over our manners." And so on, and so on.

For Prudence it was a profitable day. Between the petting of her father and the decorating of her person she had plenty to do. The hours that remained she spent in her bedroom, reading and rereading a letter. It bore neither address nor signature. It opened with neither name nor greeting. It

was written in a hand that slanted backwards. The characters might have been compared to a file of German conscripts, balancing themselves on their heels lest their officer should slap them in the face. It was a guilty missive.

But whilst she mused upon the letter, a Voice kept muttering in her ear. It spoke in microscopic whispers, but it spoke unceasingly. At each perusal of the surreptitious epistle, its message sounded clearer and its warning fell more cogent. It argued not, it used no moral suasion; it simply murmured truth. And that truth, translated into moral speech, would come to something more or less like this:

Yes, Miss Inkersley, you are an undeniably handsome young lady. You once began to think so yourself, but no one seemed to agree with you. So you did what anyone else in the world would have done; you renounced your opinion. You forgot your charms, and gave thought only to your character, a procedure quite unnatural to a really pretty girl. You met few people outside your kindred, and your kindred unanimously elected you the ugly duckling. Doris and Maud and Mildred and the rest, with their golden curls and silly little mouths, were lovely children; but you were plain. Being plain, your dress

must be plain, your education plain, your manners plain. And it was so. A first born maiden has no honour in her father's house; so you shed your sweetness on utilitarian air. Your parents, knowing you too well, price you too low; 'tis the lot of eldest daughters. They remember you a hoyden; you will be a hoyden always. Stately and unbending of figure, you are, in their eyes, still "gawky." Frank and fearless in bearing, they decide that you have "grown up mannish", a development they sagely predicted for your childhood. They began with a prejudice; with a prejudice they will end. Your glossily healthful skin, your sleek brown hair, your neat and upright carriage, appeared to them spinsterly, housewifely, prim. They were your only judges, and you believed them. You dutifully fell in with their view, and made yourself spinsterly, housewifely, prim. At the age of nineteen you resigned yourself to a masculine type of old-maidishness. It was an enchanting fancy-costume, especially as you donned it in perfect good faith. But those you moved among were people of a vulgar sort. To the lower middle class the Book of Paradox is sealed. Pity no Sir Percival was there, to love your bold simplicity, see through your Quaker uniform, and adore you.

And your parents—alas, your parents! What saith the Oracle to them? Can conscience find no words of reprobation to shame them? Woe to all parents who, through laziness or through meanness, segregate their boys and girls from social life. Let their error rise up in judgment and condemn them. The first bad man who comes anigh will find a victim. The first vile woman will scent a quarry.

Ye, who deny your children social intercourse, ye lard, may be, their minds with good advice and proverbs. Ye think that all your duty! Armouring your young with pedantry, ye are meanwhile stripping them bare. Pedantry, of however righteous kind, renders youth confident in committing folly, and obstinate in its own blind inexperience.

So Prudence, sweet Prudence, strongly-opinionated, but desperately-innocent Prudence, consider well the Oracle. Slight not the Monitor Within.

You have awaked to your own beauty. The glance of an eye has caused you to see yourself, not as you were, but as you should be. You are overjoyed. You find that you were right after all. We like to find that we were right after all. And you have found a lover. But you—which of twain do you love? Is it yourself in your new-found beauty, or is it him who made you

conscious of it? To be in love with self is not to be in love at all, though it is shockingly easy to muddle up cause and effect. Beware! A fit of gratitude is a most dangerous mental state. It always seeks out an unworthy object.

That evening, after tea, Mr. Inkersley shut himself up in his library. It was etiquette not to disturb him there. Once engulfed in his books, he usually lay hid for several hours; he would probably do so now. Prudence was mindful of the probability, and in the assurance thereof she experienced additional peace of mind.

She sent Cerulia out for a walk. She effected her third change of costume; and at the fall of twilight she wandered—absently, vacantly—down the garden towards the old summer-arbour. She entered the old summer-arbour. A Corinthian Column, draped in white diaphanous *soie-de-Chine*, moved with a strange and rigid grace into the summer-arbour—that joyless hut.

Yes, a dismal bower but meet for one who longed to meditate alone. Small chance that anyone would seek her there. It was a ruin. Its boards and trellis-work would have dropped asunder long ago, but for the thick black ivy-stalks that girded them like

ropes. It was a trysting-place for moths and beetles, and other creatures of the night. The table in its centre was striped with silver where the snails had crawled. From the coarse black leaves, above and around, a species of soot had fallen upon the table, seats, and floor—the dew of Enlightenment; the bloom of Progress. 'Twas a foul spot. One could not enter there and come out clean.

And speaks the still small Voice, the still small Voice that lends such eloquence to little things, giving a tongue of flame to common earthly toys. Your frock, Prudence, it whispers; mind your frock! It is such a pretty one, and you look so lovely in it, and so puritanically holy. From the white parting of your sleek head to the white frills fluttering round your shiny toes, you are spotless. Be careful where you tread, and what you touch. You must not sit upon those board benches, nor lean your elbows on that snaily table. They are polluted with funereal grime. You have just washed your hands. Your palms and finger tips are pink as coral. In that dark hole you cannot keep them clean. Leave it to the spiders and the flies.

“Prudence, Prudence, Prudence!”
It was the voice of father.

"What! here you are, then?" I could not think where you had hidden yourself!"

"I was taking a turn in the garden, and I sat down to rest in the old arbour."

"In the old arbour!—what a place to choose! And you dressed like a stage fairy."

"I cleaned the bench with my handkerchief."

She held it out; a little laced thing, black with coal-dust.

"You have paid for your seat," he said. "That handkerchief belongs to your mother; and it cost me a guinea."

"Let us go indoors," she warbled. "It is almost dark, and the dew is falling."

"There is no hurry," he answered. "I like this grey light. It is soothing."

He advanced to the entrance of the summer-house. Prudence began to mutely pray for caterpillars. She knew her father's freaks of mental concentration. He would take sudden fancies to the most unfanciful objects, examine them analytically, and moralize upon them at extreme length. The flower-pot of that morning had afforded one case in point. The decayed summer-arbour might easily supply a second.

"Melancholy ruin!" he said fondly, gloating on the heap of sticks and ivy. "Like us all, it is growing older daily. Ah,

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what hours have I spent here with your mother when we both were young and foolish. Here I courted her before we were married, and here I made love to her after we were man and wife. Many's the time we took our breakfast or our tea on that very bench, before you were born. The place was always draughty, even in warm weather, and we invariably had colds or swelled faces afterwards. Ah, those were happy days! Yet we looked forward to happier. Man is never content with his lot. Had we but known! But, alas, we never know when we are happy! We struggle and strive, we toil and moil. We grumble—why, what a smell of tobacco!”

“Tobacco?” She spoke with impatience and surprise.

Mr. Inkersley protruded his nose, and sniffed.

“Prudence!” he said, “I believe you have been smoking a cigar! I can't think what has come to you. You are a different girl!”

She laughed, softly, sweetly, entrancingly. She clasped her hands behind his head, and kissed him full on the mouth, as though to prove the innocence of her breath. She was ready to faint the while.

“I never got beyond cigarettes, father dear,” she cooed; “and even then I gave

up when I took to teaching the children. A governess must not smoke!"

Unconvinced, he sniffed again. "It is the scent of a cigar," he insisted, "and a good one too."

Prudence stooped to the ground, and picked up something from among the weeds.

"See!" she cried. "Here is the sinner! It is burning still!"

"As I live," exclaimed Inkersley, "it is one of my best Havanas, and only three-parts smoked!"

"What stuff!" said Prudence, laughing very loud; "someone has thrown it over from the park. I have noticed scores of cigar-ends lying about here."

She flung it over the brick wall, laughing anew.

"They will set the old harbour on fire one of these days," said the father anxiously. "That detestable park!"

Together they strolled—absently, vacantly—back to the house, in the gloaming. Prudence carried in her hand, held somewhat away from her, a little laced handkerchief darkly soiled.

X

"No, Miss Inkersley, don't disturb him ; we can wait," said Mr. Pergamen.

"Or look in a bit later on," said Mr. Wiggins. "There was a little business to be done, but it'll keep. The chief item is that our better halves have gone off to the Isle of Man together, and can't be at the silver wedding. If you'll be so good as to tell Mr. Inkersley—"

"Oh no ; go straight in, both of you," said Prudence. "I am sure my father won't mind. Really, I think he will be glad to have your moral support." There was mischief in her smile and in her voice. Immediately the lawyer and the estate agent found themselves in the old familiar library, and heard a little laugh from Miss Inkersley as she closed the door upon them.

There was an atmosphere charmingly mediæval about Mr. Inkersley's den. Two or three rooms had been knocked into one low rambling place, and their oddly disposed windows admitted strange cross lights. Cases of fossils and specimens shared the floor-space with sundry writing-tables and

heavy leather-covered chairs. A pair of enormous globes, a disarticulated skeleton, a suit of armour, and plaster busts of Socrates, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer stood out against the books that covered every wall. When Messrs Pergamen and Wiggins entered, on the forenoon in question, a blue cloud, through which the sunlight trickled in mystic golden curls, obscured two figures, each armed with a huge odourous cigar. The one proved to be Mr. Inkersley, spread out at ease in a capacious armchair. The other, huddled uncomfortably on a prie-dieu in the centre of the thread-bare Turkey carpet, was an anthropoid creature in rags.

"Mr. Pergamen! Mr. Wiggins!" exclaimed the philosopher, lolling back with an air of scornful defiance. "An unexpected pleasure! Allow me to introduce you to my friend the—h'm—my friend the pilgrim." He motioned with his cigar towards the anthropoid in rags, who eyed the intruders round some imaginary corner, showed its teeth on the side of its face that lay towards them, drew up the corresponding leg as though in anticipation of a bite, pulled a lock of stuff that dangled like a frayed rope's-end to its nose, and made a curious sound in its throat.

"My friend the pilgrim!" repeated Mr. Inkersley, with his bland smile of challenge.

"Pray be seated gentlemen. I ought to explain," said the philosopher, urbanely addressing his strange guest, "that these gentlemen represent Property and the Law. You probably owe no particular affection either to Property or the Law, and have learned, by bitter experience, to expect little courtesy at their hands. But don't let that disturb you. Beneath this roof you are secure. Christian philosophy, so far as it continues to exist, is still superior to Property and the Law. Nay, do be seated gentlemen."

Property and the law deposited themselves upon chairs as far as possible from the anthropoid in rags, and examined it (to its great discomfort) critically. Little wonder the philosopher had encouraged tobacco!

The anthropoid might have declared itself of any age, from twenty to a hundred; the fluff surrounding its teeth was a betrayal of sex, but not of years. It appeared to have no bones. Like a stoat, like a ferret, like a weasel, it might conceivably have wormed itself through a rabbit hole, a sewer, or a pair of handcuffs. Its face resembled an ancient copper bowl, hammered by some drunken sculptor of architectural demons into his ideal of human depravity; and long afterwards supplied, by some jeweller versed

in the poems of Baudelaire, with eyes composed of fragments of amethyst and opal. Its hands, brown and hairy on the back, were white and waxy in the palm; the nails long, pointed, and onyx-black; hands that had never toiled. A remnant that had once been scarlet was knotted around a neck that might have been stolen from an antediluvian tortoise. An earth-coloured wrapping, that had probably once been a coat, was fastened across the part called, in the case of human beings, a thorax, by means of the implement known in the kitchen as a skewer. Bag-looking flannels were knotted with tags of tape and twine below the joint denominated, in the anatomy of ordinary human bipeds, a knee. Clouts of leather were bound by bits of rope and rag to feet that one dared not think about. Upon the carpet, near to those boneless feet, lay a bundle that it would have tested a brave policemen to open, traversed by a tough crooked black-thorn, dark with use and glossy with grease. And the object hung upon the ferule of the stick—what was it? Was it a piece of rusty stove-pipe, or was it a covering for the creature's brazen head?

"I found my friend the pilgrim yesterday," explained Mr. Inkersley. "He was sitting by the park gates, watching the evening star,

and I invited him to come round this morning for some clothes I didn't need, a smoke, a chat, and a mouthful of food. Mr. — By the way," turning to the tramp, "I don't yet know your name?"

"'m gen'lly knowed as Smith." His manner of speaking suggested a chewer when he spits.

"Ah, yes—Smith. A most appropriate appellation. From the days of Tubal Cain, son of Cain the fugitive, all the wanderers have been smiths. They bequeathed to mankind the art of metal-working—at once the earliest craft and latest science—and then, according to a common ethnological analogy, themselves lapsed from prominence, leaving their precious discovery to ungrateful brother tribes. Our vaunted factories and engineering works in Grimville are doubtless developed from seeds scattered, a thousand years ago, by some nomadic Smith. Very probably your father, assisted by your mother and their tent-dwelling children, actually pursued the picturesque old calling of tin-workers, Mr. Smith?"

"Father and mother!" said Mr. Smith. "Never 'ad none."

"There! cried Inkersley in delight. "A man without a father or a mother! A human being who knows no more of his parentage than the sparrow cast from the nest!—now,

in this latter end of the century, when even the labouring classes trace their pedigrees with Rabbinical zeal. Never had a father or mother! And may I enquire where you were born, Mr. Smith?"

"Never was born as I knows of. I'm 'ere, an' I'm still alive; that's all as I knows."

"Perfect!" cried Inkersley. "A thing of nature! A man, and still a thing of nature—now in these days of board-schools and false teeth! He is here, and that is sufficient. How he came here, he knows little and cares less May I ask your probable age, Mr. Smith.?"

"Aven't got no age. Allus puts m'self down at forty-five. Done it twenty year."

"Wise man!" cried Inkersley, clapping his hands. "Why should we whittle down our life by adding up our years? Why should we be grown up till we can play no longer? We place ourselves on iron rails of time and duty; and the joy of life runs to seed in the side-space. Our friend has summer and winter, sun and moon, to guide him on his journey; with them he is content. And tell me, Mr. Smith, where do you consider your home to be."

"'Ome!" Mr. Smith chuckled quite pleasantly.

"Observe gentlemen," said Inkersley, beaming with approbation, "Mr. Smith goes two moves better than our ridiculous

selves. Our forefathers had homes; we have houses; but Mr. Smith's shelter is the forest free and wild—now!—now in these days of bicycles and motor-cars, and such like media for the extension of vulgarity! A spark of true wisdom, left, by miraculous survival, unextinguished, when all the surrounding world is steeped in the imbecility called Civilization, still shines in the person of this lowly pilgrim. Oh, how grateful should we be that, in the howling wilderness of modernism, there is still one wild flower to be found—beautiful and fragrant!"

"Very beautiful, he, he!" said Mr. Pergamen.

"Very fragrant, haw, haw!" said Mr. Wiggins.

"Mr. Smith has been telling me his adventures," said Inkersley. "He has been a great traveller; but I suspect he scarcely knows his own real history."

"Anyhow, he wouldn't care to tell it, p'ra'ps," suggested Mr. Wiggins.

"Like our race, like our faith, like the slavery we call Civilization," enlarged the philosopher, "he comes to us from prehistoric mists. He is one of the last of an expiring branch of the human family. He belongs to a hereditary caste of immemorial antiquity—one of the few remaining to this period. Whilst we, in common with all Chris-

tendom, have insensibly changed into machines, carrying out a mechanical task automatically, and for no imaginable purpose, he still abides the child of Nature, the humble creature of Providence. He owns no property and labours under no responsibilities. Nationality, politics, education, patriotism, progress, and such myths, are to him names without meaning. Ah, how much he is spared! He pays no taxes, joins no strikes, talks no cant. The sky is his roof, the earth his couch, the crumbs that fall from our table his food, the water of the brook his drink."

"Query," said Mr. Pergamen.

"If he does drink water he can always put a good strong stick in it," said Mr. Wiggins, pointing to the greasy blackthorn.

"Our friend," continued Inkersley, regardless of scoffs and sneers, "says that he does not know his age; and he speaks truth. He belongs to all times and all places. A humble camp-follower of arrogant humanity, he remains, whilst the race are rushing on they know not whither, exactly as he was before the world was spoilt. When mankind, struck with megalomania that has never left them, rose up to build the Tower of Babel, he, founder of constructive science, sat down upon the grass and watched in silent scorn. When the

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Jews in exile sat down and wept beside the streams of Babylon, he rose and gathered up the fragments of the food they deemed unclean. When the Master fed the multitudes with loaves and fishes, he was there. He understood already, by an inherited tradition, the lost secrets the Great Psychologist revived about No Thought for the Morrow, and Beholding the Lilies of the Field. He gathered up scraps, in plenty, when Rome lay smoking in her ashes; for man's sinful perversity was ever his opportunity. He was a stowaway on board the trireme that carried Constantine the Great to Byzantium; he and the rats have always travelled free. He followed, a harmless non-belligerent, at all the Ten Crusades. He, who had wandered from monastery to monastery, and had never departed hungry from their charitable doors, still picked up crumbs when brutal hands tore down the ancient Church. In the bloody fruitless strife of Cavalier and Roundhead, he shared in the spoils of both, but not in the infamies of either. At the Gordon Riots of 1780, as in the devastating French eruption of 1793, he was on the battle field though never in the battle. Uncontaminated by what the ignorant call Opinions and Principles—really apologetics for all that is ferocious and fanatical in the animal nature of man—he

has ever put to profitable uses what man's wantonness and wickedness have spilt. And he is ubiquitous. I myself have found him in the Piazzis of St. Peter and St. Mark, on the quays of Antwerp and Stamboul, in the Champs Elysées, in Hyde Park, and, last of all, at the gates of Denmark Park, where the custodians (shame on them!) would not allow him to enter. He is poor because he has nothing to lose, and rich because he has nothing to gain, and happy because of both. The wide world is his home, and where he stands everything is his possession, as far as eye can see. Is it not so Mr. Smith?"

"Aye, aye; 've tramped a tidy bit in m' time," returned the pilgrim.

"Well, Mr Smith, I wont detain you longer just now," said Inkersley rising. "To-morrow morning, at nine o'clock, sharp, I shall have a photographer here to take your portrait. And please come precisely as you are now. The suit I promised you, you can put on afterwards, or sell it if you think fit. What I want is the photo of a man still free and unsophisticated, and not a wretched imitation of tame hypocrites like myself. We have already enough and to spare of those fetid shams." He rang the bell. "Excuse me, Mr. Smith; these gentlemen have some business with me, I expect. We tame fools are worried with all sorts of

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inaneities. We pretend to enjoy them till we get to believe we actually do." Cerulia entered. "Here, Cerulia, conduct this gentleman to the kitchen, and give him a good meal and plenty of beer; don't stint him. And on the bed in my room you will find a bundle of clothes. Give them to him. Until to-morrow, Mr. Smith." He wrung that awful hand. "Remember, to-morrow at nine punctually. Have another cigar to smoke after your snack." He presented it, and Mr. Smith was led away.

"Well I'll be blowed!" said Mr. Wiggins, feigning to expectorate.

"This comes of your good lady being from home!" said Mr. Pergamen, waving a handkerchief before his nose. "Our poor dear wives have forsaken us also, but they made us promise to behave ourselves properly."

"The man's a thoroughbred vagabond!" said Mr. Wiggins irefully.

"A sturdy beggar!" said Mr. Pergamen.

"A confirmed loafer!" said Mr. Wiggins.

"A professional mendicant!" said Mr. Pergamen.

"Bah, what's in a name?" said Inkersley, settling down joyfully to defend his position.

"What's in a name?" echoed Mr. Pergamen, "that which we call a tramp, by any other name—he, he!"

"I don't suppose that beggar has done a day's work in his life," said Mr Wiggins.

"Never," said Inkersley; "nor his father, nor their fathers, back to the remotest antiquity. That is why he remains untamed and unspoilt. You dub him tramp and beggar, and miss the point entirely. He is simply man—*au naturel*; one of those children of nature to whom a home is prison and work a torment."

"You should be ashamed to encourage such a character " said Mr. Pergamen.

"Why?"

"You are insulting industry."

"You mean greed, Pergamen. Take away your cant about work and its glories! Man in his lust of gold—useless gold; a duke can consume no more than that wanderer—has reduced himself to servitude, and looks with envy upon a few poor brothers who still tread in the paths of primitive freedom. A servile snobbery will suffer nought but servile snobs. All classes to-day are composed of them. Mr. Smith is one of the last of the gentlemen."

"Gentlemen!—wretches that prey upon the virtuous!"

"Upon the money-grubbing, you should say. Nor do they prey at all. Mr. Smith looks for chivalry in a world that has lost all chivalry; for hospitality among fellow-

creatures who have renounced all hospitality. And still, slighted and scorned, he leads his innocent beautiful life, to teach us that freedom and trust in Providence are possible even in these days of social tyranny. Why should the farmer refuse a crust from his table, a rest in his barn, to these few wanderers of the race of Cain? Why should they be cast out, and stigmatized, and kicked about, and imprisoned, simply because they prefer liberty in rags to slavery in broadcloth? We howl out our old platitudes about Freedom and Equality, and we fling a brother into gaol because he prefers to be free and doesn't aspire to be anyone's superior. We live lives of penal servitude ourselves, and we tolerantly decree that there shall be no exceptions."

"But, dear Inkersley, the social system is founded upon obedience to rules of life and work. Law and order could not exist if exceptions were made."

"O your lovely social system! Your delightful law and order! You cake God's sweet earth over with a patent asphalt floor—bare and bleak and hideous; there you go through interminable fancy drills—knapsack drills—shot-drills—and persuade yourselves you are fighting a battle. You carry all kinds of gaudy banners, and shout all kinds of noisy war-cries: Progress,

Enlightenment, Education, and the rest. You think yourselves volunteers, dying for noble principles: and all the while you are conscripts, driven by a social press-gang, going through an aimless and idiotic sham-fight. A few escape the service. Some drop through the cracks of the social floor involuntarily, and your sweet Society kindly stamps on them if ever again they attempt to show their heads above. Others, of whom our poor friend Mr. Smith is one, have managed to avoid the social drill-yard altogether. At times they are forced by circumstances to cross it, under the guns of Property and Law and Order. And woe betide them should they by mischance fall into the gentle clutches of those humanizing agencies."

"Well," said Mr. Wiggins, "it would be a rum world if you had your own way, old man. And may I ask what's the use of your sturdy beggars?"

"Use!" cried Inkersley, kicking an imaginary football. "Use! Take away your utilitarian beastliness! That key-stone of all hypocrisy! Why must I invent an excuse for being here, since I didn't come of my own accord? And why must Mr. Smith? In your lovely drill-yard everything must tell lies about its own utility, and if it can't lie plausibly enough about itself, you

fling it out of doors. Violets and butterflies must be expunged, but malt and hops are 'useful' to refresh your gallant soldiers! Have statues any use? Have pictures, poems, novels any use? Have plays and music, flowers and waterfalls, any use? Must we grub like moles in the earth, until we are buried like dead dogs in the earth? Is everything of interest and beauty to vanish from our midst?"

"I fail to see much interest or beauty in Mr. Smith, he, he," said Mr. Pergamen.

"Nor I, haw, haw," said Mr. Wiggins.

"Then you both show your ignorance," retorted Inkersley. "That outcast is a thing of beauty, and a joy for so long as he shall last. Looking upon that child of nature I am reminded of the beautiful England that has disappeared; the England of Chaucer, of Spenser, of Shakespeare, when human beings, possessed of living souls actuated by a living faith, wandered among gnarled forests, over windy moors, through winding mossy lanes; when the land was full of beauty and men's hearts replete with wisdom; when even the clowns and gravediggers uttered eternal truths. He carries me back to the days of William Blake when the last shoots of man's divinity were dying out before the withering blight of Progress; when there were still purling

brooks, and flowery meads, and echoing greens, and fairy rings; when angels of Providence still watched beside the cots of little children. All, all have vanished."

"I wouldn't care to have your friend Mr. Smith watching over my little ones," said Mr. Pergamen. "He is a typical specimen of what the police authorities call a park-pest."

"The police authorities, forsooth! Those rogues in silver buttons! Those symbols of social slavery—trained, paid, pensioned, to suborn."

"Smith belongs to the criminal class," said Mr. Wiggins.

"You progressive folks," said Inkersley, "calmly decree everyone a criminal who dissents from your own social doxy. The true criminal wears a silk hat on his head, and a furred coat on his back. He is usually a director of companies, and very often a magistrate. Heaven help the innocent creature of the wayside dragged before that brigand!"

"Unless he transgressed he wouldn't be dragged before him," said Mr. Pergamen.

"Certainly not. He transgresses. But what is his transgression? That he prefers God's starry sky, God's flower-embroidered earth, to a loathsome casual ward; where he is stripped by brute force and plunged in

greasy water; where his poor old rags are baked to tinder; where he must pick his fingers raw with oakum before they will let him go upon his harmless way. You make a man a criminal because he sleeps upon the ground, and yet you brag of Freedom and Enlightenment!"

"Them's the fellows," said Mr. Wiggins, "that rob the hen-roosts."

"And supposing they do, what then? If man's dog-in-the-manger greed refuses them a bone to stay their stomach, or a few waste turnip-tops, are they to blame? Do you suppose that a wanderer with no ambitions, robs for fun? No! it is your landlord, your company promoter, your capitalist, who robs from sheer rapacity—impelled by the basest impulses of snobism. He must send his cubs to Eton and to Oxford. He must couple his trollops with broken-down aristocrats. So widows and orphans and wayside wanderers go under, and the titled publican comes out on top. Do you suppose our poor friend Smith would rob *me*?"

"You bet he would," said Mr. Wiggins, "if he got the chance!"

"I tell you again, Wiggins, you show your ignorance. If it were not for my wife and children and their prejudices, I would engage Mr. Smith to guard my front-door like a watch-dog, and so doing show your

civic humbugs what I think of them. He should have his food, his pipe, and a wisp of straw under the porch ; that is all he would desire. And I might leave my dearest treasures in his keeping. Believe me, a man with no social cravings does not steal. But poor Smith could not long endure a settled home. I should wake up one morning and find my watch-dog gone."

"Yes, and a lot of other things besides," said Mr. Wiggins.

"A lot of other things," agreed Mr. Pergamen.

"I tell you Pergamen, I tell you Wiggins, you know nothing about it. You are both grossly prejudiced. Your business is to protect Property—which is almost always dishonestly acquired—and your colleagues are police officials and magistrates and coroners—a gang of tyrannical hypocrites. The dog-like fidelity of the poor is simply beautiful. I speak from experience. No one but myself dare go into my slum property after dark. I have paid calls in Pump Court at midnight, unarmed, alone, my coat unbuttoned, my watch chain dangling, while the policeman stood hiding himself behind a lamp-post a hundred yards away. And the wretched night-birds doffed their hats, and stood aside to let me pass. Believe me, my fine sceptics, the downtrodden

classes know their friend when they meet him."

"Since you mention Pump Court, he, he," said Mr. Pergamen, "it is Pump Court I and Wiggins came to talk to you about. Have you seen this morning's *Daily Wail*?"

"The *Daily Wail*?—no, I don't read such bathotic rubbish as that!"

"Well, here is a paragraph might interest you."

The solicitor unfolded a newspaper and read. "He, hes" tinkled like grace-notes round the words.

"'Unsanitary Property in Grimville. 'The Inspector of Nuisances has made a report to the Health Committee of the Town Council regarding certain residential properties, situated in the very centre of our stately city, which bear witness to a callous disregard, on the part of their proprietors, for the health and comfort of those members of the labouring class who are compelled by the exigencies of their various employs to reside therein. Pump Court, Inkersley's Buildings, is specially cited as a glaring instance of proprietorial neglect. The official statement will be found fully reported in another column. So harrowing were the details submitted by our worthy Inspector of Nuisances, that without loss of time we despatched a

representative to the locality he condemns. With some trepidation, our brave reporter entered the horrible precincts, and found them in a state of filth and dilapidation that almost transcends belief. The ill-effects of over-crowding, defective water-supply, and an obsolete sewage-system, are deplorably evident in the sickly appearance of the tenants, especially as instanced in their children. One poor woman stated that her husband had been seven months without employment, that her thirteen-year-old-daughter had been down with typhoid fever, and that she was paying, for the use of two small rooms and a wash-house, the exorbitant rent of two shillings and sixpence per week. We feel so touched by the details of this particular case, that we have decided to commence a subscription in aid of the unfortunate family. Contributions on behalf of the Suckwell Relief Fund may be sent——’”

“The *what* Relief Fund?” roared Inkersley, jumping up and stamping about in a paroxysm of rage.

“The Suckwell Relief Fund. It sounds well, doesn’t it?”

“Suckwell—the man who hasn’t paid me six months’ rent in five years! Suckwell—the woman whose brats I’ve been feeding with calves-foot jelly and mock-turtle soup!

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Suckwell—the beggars to whom I have given more sovereigns than I have teeth in my head! The unfortunate Suckwell Family!”

“That’s them,” said Wiggins cheerfully. “We know ’em of old don’t we, haw, haw?”

“Suckwell!” gasped Inkersley, pushing his hair up on end and snorting indignation.

“The same,” said Pergamen, “A most unfortunate family, he, he!”

“Pump Court—! And all these years I have kept on letting the dens in it for fear those wretched objects should be left without a home! Pump Court—the very bane of my life! Why if I built a public house there—”

“It would pay you twenty-five per cent., old man,” said Wiggins; “and you’re a blank fool not to do it.”

“On the first of next year Pump Court comes down!” shouted Inkersley. “Pergamen, I’ll put it in my will! Wiggins, give every man-jack of ’em notice to quit!”

“Here, hear!” said Pergaman.

“Hip, hip, hooray!” cried Wiggins.

There was a loud knock at the door, and Cerulia burst into the room, flushed and out of breath; tears in her eyes and terror in her voice.

“Please sir!” she blurted bubblingly; “Please sir, that ere tramp man ’as been

an' gone an' lifted the antike silver candlesticks!"

"*What!!*"

"He's stole 'em; they're gone!"

"Impossible!" cried Inkersley.

"Impossible!" said Pergamen. "What can a child of nature want with silver candlesticks?"

"Impossible!" said Wiggins. "If it had been a tinder-box—"

"Cerulia, why did you not keep an eye on him?" demanded the philosopher.

"Please sir, you said as 'e was a gentleman. I just 'opped upstairs to fetch them clothes while 'e was finishin' 'is beef and beer. When I came down again 'e 'ad 'is 'at on 'is 'ead, and 'is bundle over his shoulder. 'E must 'ave been into the scullery and picked up the antike candlesticks. I 'ad 'em there to clean. Oh, what *will* the missis say?"

"P'r'aps he'll bring 'em back again, haw, haw!" suggested Wiggins.

"Doubtless," agreed Pergamen; "when he comes to-morrow to have his photo taken!"

"To be sure," said Inkersley, clutching greedily at this last straw; "he was to return to-morrow to have his portrait taken."

"Please sir," blubbered Cerulia, "'e aint comin' back no more. 'E says to me as 'e went out, 'Tell the old bloke,' says 'e, 'as

photographs don't suit my style of beauty'."

Mr. Wiggins fell back in a chair, kicked his feet towards the ceiling, and roared till the veins in his forehead went purple. Mr. Pergamen staggered about like a seasick man in a storm, and said "he, he," till he collided with the bust of Schopenhauer. and hanging thereto, coughed himself crimson and speechless.

"I really hope, father," said Prudence, who, alarmed by the hubbub, had joined the party unobserved, "that this will be a lasting lesson to you. I knew what that scoundrel was. I was sure he had evil intentions. You *would* take him in, and you see what he has done! Didn't I tell you so?"

"Shall I go and fetch a p'liceman, please sir?" enquired Cerulia. She was intimate with the force.

"Good heavens, no!" said the master. "It is bad enough to be charged with misdemeanours in one edition of the *Daily Wail*, without appearing as prosecutor in the next. I shall be the laughing-stock of Grimville!"

"And serve you well right," said Prudence severely. "You richly deserve it."

XI

Miss Inkersley's bump of veneration can have been but poorly developed. If she still cherished ideals, no member of the circle she moved in fulfilled them. Outwardly bright, vigorous, companionable, she remained solitary. Utterly unlike any of her relatives, she was a stranger even within the gates of Denmark Lodge. Had she been a hired governess she could not have been more essentially an alien. She ruled the household as a foreign prince might rule a subject state—admirably, unselfishly, severely. The subtle sympathy of blood was lacking. Her father, whilst loving him sincerely, she profoundly pitied. He was a day-dreamer, afflicted with intellect sufficient to make him speculate morbidly and dogmatize absurdly. Her mother she loved no less, but commiserated yet more. She was a spoilt darling, grown to middle-age without ever having grown up. Her sisters were sweet and lovely babies, of summers varying from ten to twenty-one; but babies all. Hamlet had the seeds of genius; but probably his mother's softness or his father's

mysticism would spring up with him, and choke them. Herself she had accounted, until a week ago, a serviceable piece of domestic machinery, useful but no ornament.

One person, indeed, filled a special niche in her gallery. She had hung a little lamp at the foot of one cold image, and its flame had flickered with a pallid light for years and years. The statue represented Dr. Dolling.

In early girlhood, climbing an apple-tree in the garden, she had fallen and broken a leg. It was a bad fracture, and Dr. Dolling, in the absence of his father, who was also of "the faculty," had tended and cured it. Ever since, she had treasured for him in her heart that mysterious awe so often rendered to one who, inflicting pain, eliminates suffering. Quite easily, although he was twenty years her senior, she could have grown too fond of him. One deterrent—apart from her own common sense—was the familiarity that makes hum-drum. She and the doctor were alike pieces of furniture; she of a lowlier, he of a loftier kind, but both outside the poetry of life. She was content to leave him an isolated icon, and watch him grow grey at a distance. Another and more cogent obstacle was that she fancied he disliked her.

In her delusion of believing herself plain

she had doffed all grace of manner. Her frankness had become crude, her simplicity brusque, her correctness prudish. That tender pudency which, bred of self consciousness, gives to woman half her power over man, she had allowed to lapse. She spoke to people in a high voice, looking them full in the face. She had become primly aggressive. Dr. Dolling, on the contrary, was the most retiring of mortals. His grey eyes were ever bent upon the ground. His head, visibly tinged with grey, drooped slightly on his strong square shoulders. He had few words. In his arguments with Mr. Inkersley he was, in fact, a listener. His personality he had sunk in his profession. An excellent surgeon, of long experience, his reticence had held him back from fame. The small tradesman loves blarney and fattens on cant; and in these latter Years of Our Lord the world's prizes are in his patronage.

Miss Inkersley knew Mr. Dolling as a sister knows a brother. That is to say she scarcely knew him at all, though her dealings with him looked back over all the past she could remember. A born sick-nurse, energetic, prompt, unwearying, she it was who, in the small ailments incidental to the childhood of six sisters and a brother younger than herself, received the doctor's orders and saw

them carried out. Standing at one or another of seven bedsides, she had watched him feel seven pulses and examine seven tongues, not once but many times. Invariably he had greeted her coldly, kept his back turned on her perseveringly, and left her with alacrity. So far from feeling vexed she had approved his good taste, and admired him the more.

On the morning that followed upon the Child-of-Nature episode he called at Denmark Lodge. Mistaking his brisk rat-a-plan for the postman's knock, she opened the door to him, and he entered with a flood of sunlight. He stepped straight in, without pause or question, as doctors do.

She tottered back, and stammered something inane. She had on a crisp print frock, and a holland apron piped with red braid; her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. She was not dressed to receive doctors. A week ago her attire would have been her last thought.

She blushed outrageously. Blushing was an accomplishment she had only just acquired. Like many high-coloured people she had been a stranger to this sign of weakness. She had despised it in others. Now she found herself overwhelmed, on the least provocation, by colossal blushes. On the present occasion, it seemed as though

some valve in the core of her physiology had opened, and forced a hot flood outward. From the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes she tingled with tell-tale scarlet. She wondered her clothes did not catch fire, and was conscious of looking frightfully awkward.

So the doctor must have thought; for he stood speechless in the middle of the hall, his mouth open and his hat on his head, and quite forgot to shake hands. But then embarrassment is always embarrassing, and he was dazed, no doubt, by the morning sun. The glare of the street outside was in blinding contrast with the gloom of the damp old vestibule.

Miss Inkersley quickly shut him up with her father. Obsessed by a yearning desire to hide herself and her blushes and her bare arms, and impelled by an overmastering sense of guilt, she withdrew to her bedroom, locked the door, and lowered the blinds.

Dr. Dolling carried his constraint of manner into Mr. Inkersley's den. He had not been sent for, and he appeared to have come on a rather aimless errand. Happily he found his unruly patient ripe for argument. His feeble attempts to lead the discussion in some particular direction, known only to himself, were a dismal failure. So he gave himself up to be dialectically

mauled, only parrying sufficiently to keep the pessimist amused.

"You doctors," said the invalid, in the course of a smashing harangue, "are hopeless. You are more hopeless than the parsons."

"We are more useful, however," retorted the surgeon, who meant little or nothing of what he said.

"You are, on the whole, even less useful."

"The healing art—"

"Oh stuff! There is no such thing!"

"You deny facts."

"You blind yourselves to truth. Your triumphs of healing are more unsupported than the thaumaturgics of the mediaeval Church."

"The results we produce—"

"Are nil."

"Look at our hospitals."

"Look at the convents."

"The convents—! Hot-beds of superstition!"

"You are built on superstition. You are a sham priesthood preaching a new fetish."

"Bodily sickness is a sorrowful fact. Not to treat it would be to deny it. No sane man denies a patent fact."

"No; nor cures it with patent medicines. Benedict will tell you that sickness of the

soul is a sterner reality, and the prime cause of all physical suffering."

"Pooh! Bodily disease is visible and palpable, and therefore a legitimate subject of research."

"Spiritual disease is visible and impalpable, and therefore a nobler subject of research."

"I fail to see it."

"You fail to see a great many considerable things; and so do I. Probably we shall never see them, save in their effect. Electricity and polarity are both invisible save in their effects. Yet you would be the first to rank them as weighty factors both in theory and practice. Grief and madness, life and death, are invisible in their principles and in their motives; but we can scarcely treat these phenomena as abstractions, I opine. Ah, Dolling, the doctors' folly is the parsons' folly, after all. The priest allows his mysterious science to parody itself in soup-doles and bun-feasts; you give up the great lesions you cannot sticking-plaster for the little sores you can. The medical savant is simply the old-fashioned mountebank dressed up to date. He stands in the market-place and draws teeth. That he examines his patients' jaw by X rays instead of a farthing rush-light does not make one farthing difference. He

stops pain only by inflicting agony, as did the 'kind-heart' of old. In practice he is a charlatan, in his claims a mock priest."

"A priest?"

"Yes, a pseudo-priest. You have assumed sacerdotal rights, and you shirk the stipulated conditions. Your status is stolen ground."

"We steal nothing. We exact nothing. People come to us, and pay us for our work. If they choose not to—"

"You tell them that their body will perish. The religionists tell sinners their souls will perish, with more show of reason. Why cannot the latter save my unseen Ego, if you are able to save the sheath it dwells in? But you are not able; hence your envy. A mind that could embrace the universe takes flight, and leaves you smirking at a lump of clay. With that barrow-load of bone-manure your magic ends. The fragment seen, foresaken by the infinite soul unseen, is simply offal. Medical polity denies the invisible world; but your patients, I imagine, are of small profit to you once the invisible guest has fled. You can levy dues upon them only so long as the unseen principle animates them. Logically, taking you at your own word, man should belong to the Church throughout his life, because during that period he is, all but a particle, invisible.

On the instant of death he would be your absolute property ; for he then becomes, for the first time, strictly and solely visible. He is visible, tangible, thinkable, knowable—everything that doctors profess to love and believe in. I would like to see a law to that effect enacted. You would—judged by your own canons—be left with all the corpses. And what would you do then? Shall I tell you? You would embalm them all, and set men dreaming that the limitless Ego should return once more to its home. Your own extremest logical conclusions would bring you back to the very beginning of things. It would moreover, make you a genuine priesthood, and a more straightforward caste than you now are.”

“Anyhow, we would saddle society with no incubus. We should plant no turnstyle at a mythological foot-bridge, nor sell tickets of admission to a land that exists in promise only, as the religious priesthoods do. We are, and we will always remain, a liberating agency.”

“Oh, ho! And you really imagine that?—after you have ground man down to your worship, and whilst you tax him to the eyes for your maintenance! Can it really escape you that you are enslaving the world by a tyranny compared with which the Inquisition was tolerance?”

"Mr. Inkersley, you are not serious. For the sake of argument you are talking romance."

"Romance!—oh, is it? So, honestly, you do not grasp your own audacity? Why, your little finger is thicker than Catholicism's loins. You post yourselves at the gates of life and death, impotent to prolong life or explain death, but keen to extort tolls. Man must not be born, and dare not die, without your license. You scratch the trade-mark of your fetish on the arms of helpless infants, that, branded with a new baptism, they may grow up in servitude. You stand sentinel at the doors of army, navy, police, civil service, school, and bagnio. You lurk in every port, and chalk your pass-words upon every ship afloat. Our food and drink are at your mercy, and our houses are castles to everyone but you. You send your blue-coated minions—the very scum and riff-raff of society—into the factory, the market, the public-house and the private home. They are the most ignorant and the most venal of men; but that is a detail. They wear your livery; therefore they are sacred and inviolate. They bully and they blackmail, without redress or appeal. And not a voice is raised in protest. We bear anything and everything, like slaves."

"Which proves the need of us."

"Which proves that ignorance most dense stands for 'the will of the people,' and that superstition most blind is their substitute for faith."

"We are the authors of sanitary science; is that a crime?"

"Sanitary science—bah! As though we needed a sacerdotal caste to teach us the use of a bucket of water and a mop!"

"Civilization is the child of medicine."

"And a sickly brat you have begotton. By the way, the old priesthood claims the same glory, and on much older grounds."

"The old priesthood, as you call it, made the world more unhappy; we make it less unhappy."

"The one gave to abjects a hope beyond the grave. The other gives them pills and sticking-plaster, and the certainty of a grave."

"Pills and sticking-plaster cure aches and pains."

"It is simply untrue. If, in every prescription, you ordered bread-pills and coloured water, the sum-total of human suffering would not be enhanced one whit."

"Then, Mr. Inkersley, you positively deny that there is any efficacy in medical treatment?"

"Dr. Dolling, I positively deny it."

"If you are right, all the greatest men living are wrong."

"Four centuries ago all the greatest men living taught Transubstantiation. To deny it was blasphemy, heresy, madness. To-day you carnalists are having your innings; but why must I believe in you any more than in the sacerdotalists of old? A future age will stand up on a tub, howl for liberty, and fling you off. You are the fashion; nothing more."

"Human suffering is less to-day than it ever was before."

"Another fiction. Your healing science has produced a race having feeble bodies, rotten teeth, and no nerves. If, by chance there is less of black death and small-pox in Europe, of course the credit is due to you. If, on the other hand, cancer, paralysis, consumption, and cardiac affections ravage as they never did before, that is no fault of yours. If the perils of child-birth, the infirmities of women, and the diseases of infancy have increased out of all measure, whilst a trifle like influenza picks off its million victims one by one, as cholera morbus never did—then that is no reproach to your vigilance system. Perhaps it is not vigilance enough? bah!"

"People consult us too late. I confess that prevention is better than cure. If

people obeyed us before falling sick the gain to public health would be incalculable. That common intelligence is worth all the drugs, I am prepared to admit."

"Then why have doctors of medicine?"

"To be apostles of temperance, cleanliness, morality. This is our highest office."

"For five thousand years the old priesthood taught men to be temperate, cleanly, moral. Have you not read the Pentateuch?"

"They did not practise what they preached."

"But of course the modern doctor does! Oh, Dolling, my dear boy! Do no doctors die of drink? Are no doctors dirty? Are all doctors moral? Are medical students lovely characters—and clean? And yet you claim to rule the twentieth century!"

"If we hold large authority in the world, the world has given it to us."

"Ah, there we are at one. The world has made you what you are, just as it made the sacerdotalists what they were. It repented of them, and it will repent of you; so make your hay while the sun shines. Man has set up a new Faith; nay, rather, it is the Old Faith burlesqued. We have climbed down from heaven to earth. In place of God above we worship Mammon below. Of necessity the new Creed is one of body, not of soul. But it is a Creed, and

it must have its priesthood, and inevitably they must be *sarkikoi*. The old priesthood cared for the souls of men, which, if eternal were worth the pains. Your fraternity fettle up bodies to an average longevity of thirty-three years. Noble calling!"

"Then, according to you, Mr. Inkersley, we are not merely imposters, but interlopers?"

"Usurpers. You are exploiting the carcase of a great organism, and it has gone putrid. I have seen showmen exhibiting a dead whale, cast up by the sea, for a penny a peep. They could no more have killed it than they could have given it life. And such are you."

"You make us great!"

"I make you what you are; and that, as you truly say, is what the world has made you. You are a spontaneously-generated absurdity, and you deserve reprobation only when you deny it, affecting the sanctity that popular ignorance invests you with. You are the appropriate priests of that temple of shams called Civilization. You stucco over the sores of the children of stucco. You are the apostles of the suburbs, and the suburbs are the Kingdom of Crassdom on Earth. You know the folly of your unctions, and your parishioners half guess it. You have your sacraments, which take the form

of mysterious inoculations and injections. You boast your miracles of healing; which are purely accidents of recuperation. You publish hagiologies, like the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, stuffed with legends more staggering than those of Bede and Columba. You build and endow seminaries, where you mutilate dead paupers and live animals—the blind dissecting the blind. You have your preaching-brothers, who let off nonsensical ‘health lectures.’ Crowds of puerile men and women flock to see magnified grubs by the light of a magic-lantern, and be told how they ought to wash their body as well as their face, and eat porridge for breakfast. You have your shibboleths—alopathic, antiseptic, selective, sterilific, and a hundred more. You have produced schismatics; like homœopathists, anti-anæsthetists, hypnotists, and the rest; and your heretics are herbalists, faith-healers, bone-setters, magnetizers, mesmerists—the Lollards of the new Church of Decayed Flesh. You hand over dissentients to the suburban arm for punishment, and they are fined and imprisoned galore. You may shortly acquire powers to cremate your live Lollards as well as your dead parishioners. You are fast formulating a ritual. Save in tall hat, frock coat, and gold barnacles, you dare not

officiate. Next thing, you will decree the excommunication from the Church of Decayed Flesh of all who refuse to wear undyed wool next their skin and begin the day on tepid water."

The orator leaned back, and puffed and blew in triumph. The listener took up his hat and sighed.

"You needed a doctor when your daughter broke her leg," he said. "You came in a cab to fetch me. You were in a terrible fright."

Mr. Inkersley was taken by surprise; he fell back on bluff. "Pooh, pooh," he said: "to mend a leg is carpentering, not science."

The doctor might have followed up his *argumentum ad hominem*, but he forbore. A cheap victory was within his reach; he let it slip. "Might I speak to Miss Inkersley?" he asked, passing his hat nervously from hand to hand.

"Certainly you may speak to her!" said the father, immensely relieved. "She will be delighted. Her faith in you is most ridiculous." He hastened from the room.

After some delay he re-entered, leading Prudence by the hand. A week ago she would have been guiding him by the shoulders. Print frock and holland apron had given place to something dazzlingly

white, voluminous, but gathered at the waist. Fleecy frills flowed, foam-like, from neck to heels, softening the severe lines of her figure. Her flushed face seemed a rose mounted upon snow. There was a certain pride in Inkersley's voice, as he said :

"Here she is, Dolling. Sorry she looks so well. You might have wrought a miracle of healing."

The doctor spoke with his head drooped, as was his habit, towards the carpet :

"I only wished to ask your pardon, Miss Inkersley, for my rudeness to you as I came in. I did not greet you. In fact I did not realize that it was you who opened the door. The hall was so dark at first, and when I saw you—"

He left a long pause. Slowly raising his head, and fixing his strange icy eyes upon hers, he added—

"I was dazzled."

XII

That night Mr. Inkersley and his daughter sustained a sore shock.

Both went to bed early. Both fretted themselves to sleep late. Both were rejoicing in throes of nightmare when they were jerked into sensibility by a dull crash in the lower part of the house. Neither could be quite sure whether the noise had boomed from the Hitherland of those who wake, or from the Thule of those who dream, until they met, shivering on the landing, where their alarm deepened at the sight of each other's consternation.

"I heard a sound—a fall!" said Inkersley.

The exclamation came from his mouth in chewed fragments.

"So did I," said Prudence, trembling in every limb.

A week ago she had not known how to tremble.

"I will go down and see what it is," said Inkersley; "I am armed."

He carried a life-preserver. Prudence held a lighted candle, and its flame cast shivering shadows. Her father's shadow

capered upon the wall like a drunken goat, and smote her with a mad desire to dance in unison. She was terrified—she who once had scorned the name of fear.

Together they crept down to the hall.

"The sound came from the dining-room, I imagine," chattered Inkersley. He strove to speak with indifference, and the effect was very queer.

"I thi-think so."

They unlocked and opened the door. A puff of warm air met them in the face and blew out the candle; gross darkness enveloped them like a hot shroud. Prudence lost her hold of the candlestick, and it dropped, clattering on the tiled floor. As though by sympathy, her father let fall his weapon, which rolled away on its own account. They flung their arms around each other and kissed despairingly. Neither spoke but both implied, We are doomed; good-bye for ever!

"Let me go," the father at length said faintly, "I will open the shutters."

He spoke as who should say, I go to my death!

He groped his way down the pitch-black chamber, bumping himself here and there against the furniture, until he reached the windows. He thumped and rattled at the shutters, whilst Prudence stood twisting her

fingers, expecting each instant the bang of a revolver or the glitter of a knife. After minutes that seemed years, the shutters fell back, creaking and groaning like demons dragged from sleep. Moonlight bright as day streamed, livid and tremulous, into the room.

Prudence glanced around. Her eye fell upon a square and flat thing that lay across the fender. She began to laugh, loudly, excitedly—the laughter of relief.

“Oh, father dear,” she cried, “what a pair of stupids we are! It is only a picture fallen—look!”

The silhouette crouching against the moonlight raised its arms, and buried knotty claws in its hair. A hoarse whisper came quaking from that quaking wraith:

“Only a picture—! Only a picture—!
It is my brother William's portrait!”

The voice that spoke was not her father's, and she silently thanked God that she could not see the face.

The scare that startled the midnight was followed by an omen which clouded the midday.

In the bright forenoon, a pippin-faced lad, a typical tradesman's boy, jogged blithely through the streets of Grimville in the direction of Denmark Lodge. He bore

under his left arm a box-shaped parcel, not much smaller than himself, wrapped in brown paper and tied with white twine; and as he rolled forward on his errand he accompanied the curious swing-trot peculiar to youthful shop sweepers by strains of vocal melody. Again, and again, and again, stamping time with his heels, he informed the public at large that he belonged to a rickety-rackety crew, and warned them of his being, on the whole, a decidedly turbulent character. Upon the phrase "strolling round the town," he yanked at the bell and tirmed at the knocker of the home of the Inkersleys. During a sublime pause of seventeen seconds he delivered his burden to Cerulia, "for Mr. Slingsby." Then off he went to "knocking people down," as merry as a lark. And, like Nana Sahib, he vanished from subsequent history.

"What can it be?" queried Mr. Inkersley, knuckling the paste-board.

"What *can* it be?" wondered Prudence savouring millinery.

"More trash for your mother and sisters to make themselves frights with," grumbled the parent, suspicious of bills. "There is no name or address. Give me those scissors, Prue."

He cut the string and opened the brown paper. Glazed paper. He stripped off the

glazed paper. Cardboard. He lifted a lid. Lawn paper. He ripped away the lawn paper. Shavings. He threw away the shavings in a lump, and bent over the box. As he shrank away again his expression was that of a man who has mistaken vinegar for wine.

Prudence, in turn, bent over the mysterious coffre, and in turn shrank back. In its bottom lay a large wreath of immortelles.

No address had been affixed to the package, nor could any clue be found as to the sender's or the maker's name. What could it mean? Was it an error of delivery? Was it an ugly joke? Was it a threat? What became of the apple-faced youth who deposited the box? Did he go knocking people down until he met with a stronger and more rickety-rackety than himself, and in deadly combat receive the guerdon of tyrannical turbulence?—But why pose riddles that no living soul can guess? For no man knoweth unto this day.

"Burn the beastly thing!" said Prudence, "it isn't nice to have it in the house."

"Burn it? No," answered the father meditatively. "Take it to my study, Prue, and leave it there. It may be useful."

Fate usually sends its presages of ill in quick succession. The silent shafts of pre-

monition, like the noisy bolts of destiny they herald, fall thick and fast. When one lights quivering at your feet, expect another. On the whole, it is a benign arrangement. It is in mercy that we are allotted our Lent of anguish, whether it last but forty days or drag out to a decade. Better get our terrors over at one spell. Cision of fresh tissues gives worse anguish than the probing of a wound. Actual cautery seems less cruel on each repetition. Then should not Herbert Inkersley repine that shock succeeded shock. Weak, worn, tottering, he might have collapsed under what occurred that afternoon, had not midnight panic and noontide warning hardened his mind to disaster.

Prudence was sitting in her bedroom, reading and re-reading, folding and re-opening a letter. Her expression, as she read, was not of gladness; she wore an exceedingly troubled look. She had just (perhaps for the twentieth time) replaced the paper in its envelope, when an ear-splitting smash resounded on the floor of the room above, exactly over her head. She leapt to her feet and pressed her palms to her ears, whilst window-frames, toilet-ware, ornaments, chairs and tables, jumped and rattled. For a moment she stood stunned. Had the crack of doom been struck to end her woes?

She rushed out to the landing. Inkersley was already scaling the stairs, four steps at a time. "Father!" she cried, "the house is coming down! The attics have fallen in!"

He made no answer, but continued his frantic ascent. His face was dreadful to behold. Prudence followed almost as recklessly, and in a few seconds both found themselves in a large bare apartment. Nearly in the centre of the floor, splintered to a hundred shards but still retaining its circular shape, lay a great disc of plaster. In the ceiling over head yawned a black hole, two yards across, striped by ancient laths that resembled the ribs of a decaying animal.

Inkersley stood and gazed up into the cavity. His drawn mouth gaped open. His eyes, lifeless, and fixed, protruded from their sockets. His arms projected, stiff and taut, from shoulders strangely humped up. His fingers stuck out in odd directions from his hands. He appeared to be paralysed. He looked so grotesque and so ridiculous that Prudence laughed aloud. But it was not a pleasant laugh. It lost itself in something very like a sob.

"What a couple of noodles we are, father!" she said. "A piece has dropped out of the nursery ceiling, and we fancy the house is tumbling down! We deserve to

stay here till to-morrow, standing in the corner with our faces to the wall. We have both turned babies!"

After painful effort, Inkersley found the power of speech.

"We must lock the room up," he said, in that foreign accent she had heard before. "We must lock it up at once! It is dangerous—terribly dangerous!"

"Why it is a mere nothing," said Prudence. "Those old laths have warped, and a piece of plaster has fallen. The heat has done it, no doubt. It can be mended to-morrow morning. It is not an hour's work."

"For the present we must close the room," insisted Inkersley. "In a few days the children will be home. They are sure to want to play here, and it is dangerous—terribly dangerous. After the silverwedding it can be repaired; till then the place must be kept locked. Stay here, Prue, while I go and find the key; and don't allow Cerulia to come in."

He left her alone, and she fell to contemplating the scene with melancholy feelings. It was an empty barn of a place, half schoolroom, half play-room. Some maps, texts, and diagrams made conspicuous the bareness of the walls. A writing-table, a bookcase, and a few hacked-about ink-stained chairs bore witness to hours of

teaching in days gone by. Ah, golden hours, never to return! Had she but known what happy times those were! Alas, as her father was so fond of preaching, we never know when we are happy.

From a nail high up above the chimney-piece hung a pliant cane. With that rod she had once flogged Hamlet, to the horror of her parents and her sisters, and ever since it had pended there *in terrorem*. Stern in her self-righteousness, she had refused to take the spoilt boy in hand on any less condition than the right of castigating him. Once only she had done so, and victory had been complete. Catching sight now of the emblem of discipline, a pang of remorse shot through her, and a flush of shame stole to her cheeks. Was she herself not suffering harsher chastisement? Unhooking the cane from its peg, she twisted it to innocuousness and tossed it through the window. A queen has forfeited the Power of the Sword.

Her father returned with a key, and forthwith locked up the schoolroom. During the remainder of that day he uttered not one word.

At night Prudence wandered—slowly, reluctantly—down the garden. She was dressed in half-mourning. The summer-arbour had lost its spell. It was a bower of love no more. It was a hearse.

XIII

"I was dazzled."

How Prudence pondered upon those three words. How she nursed them to her heart until they quickened in its warmth, shot long roots into her soul, opened huge flowers in her imaginings. Alas; those purple blooms were out of reach. She might never cull them, they were passion-flowers grafted upon briers. Such parasitic growth could yield no fruit. They were dream-garlands. The spiked stalks were real and near. They coiled themselves around her, and drove their thorns into her flesh. At every step they tore her till she bled. Every hour they gripped her closer and crippled her more cruelly. Splendrous blossoms broke forth like stars of hope above her head, only to shed their petals at her feet. She suffered the pangs of Tantalus. She wished she had never been born. She wished herself dead.

She wished herself dead.

Of course she didn't mean it.

Wishing oneself dead is a quack medicine, to be used by the morally sick. It is a kind

of soothing syrup. It is the ladies' equivalent of profane language. Man, uttering oaths, plays at murder. Woman, wishing herself dead, has a game of suicide. Both exercises are a frank confession of imbecility. Something goes wrong. You cannot set it right. You *won't* be hurt for nothing, no you won't. So you have a good fit of naughtiness. You swear, or wish yourself dead, till you fancy you have taken out your money's worth. Then you come out of your tantrums, and begin to be good again. And yet we think ourselves grown-up! Wretched little children! Spoilt brats all of us, going from bad to worse most of us! Yes, from bad to worse; growing ever more peevish and more gullible with age; taking fresh license to do mischief with impunity as years of folly total up; returning (perforce, and with no credit) a trifle nearer to the ideal we kept under glass for sons and daughters, but never strove to imitate, as Experience dwindles to senility, and Powers break down. Then, worn out with play and passion, we think about our bed. Our bed. That everlasting bed. Teeth chatter at the thought of it, heart shrinks at the name of it; for its sheets are icy cold, and the glow of youth has gone. But rest you must, for your head is wagging on your shoulders. Father says, Bed-time! so put

a cheerful face upon the matter, though you must run the gauntlet of the ghosts. You want no candle to light you, for others' hands will strip you. Stretch yourself out in faith, as you did when an innocent babe, and ere your nightgown covers you, already you will have fallen asleep. And in that dumb black sleep you will be, for the first time good. You will be beautiful. You will be perfect. Then squinting eyes are fixed in total blindness. Then stumbling feet grow firm in iron stiffness. Then four-score years of error and delusion are blotted out in dust, and human nature attains perfection in the stately mechanism of dissolution. Our first sublime achievement is our last on earth. And that is involuntary.

"I was dazzled."

Simple words. Quite unambiguous. From an older man they would have been simple statement of a fact. From a younger man they might have implied (what Prudence scorned supremely) a compliment. From Dr. Dolling they meant everything—yes, Everything.

They were a revelation.

They were a confession.

They were a challenge.

He had *not* thought her plain. He had *not* thought her old-maidish. He had *not* found her repellant. He had *not* misunder-

stood her. On the contrary he, and he alone, had understood and admired her—he whose admiration alone she counted worth a straw. The misapprehension of years was dispelled by three words. The standpoint of two hearts was inverted by a glance. He had loved her all along. He loved her now.

He was dazzled. Why? Those cold unwinking orbs were not of the kind that play one sudden tricks. What dazzled them? Was it the rich crimson of her blush? Was it the startled whiteness of her teeth? Was it the lustrous guilt of her soft brown eyes? Nay, surely, not these outward signs. Or if these outward signs, then only because they told of something deeper in her breast. Something had given way there. Something had melted. In the warm red chambers of her heart some icicle had thawed, some link of steel had snapped, and she had burst—throbbing, quivering—into bloom. A man had lifted up a mirror (alas! a cracked and blistered mirror) to her face, and she had seen herself across the garden-wall of sex. At the age of twenty-four years, after a girlhood lost in close seclusion of domestic duty, she had, for the first time, seen herself through manhood's eyes. From a governess, from a house-wife, from a sister-mother, she had at once and

for ever become a Woman. The transformation was sudden, irresistible. The awakening of the feminine Self was convulsive. Those sighs and tears, those flushes and alarms—so unwonted and so absurd—were sparks from a fire that raged within. Dr. Dolling had diagnosed the symptoms at a glance. O that it had been he had lifted up the glass and wrought the transmutation; for he alone could cure the damage another had done. Then cure was henceforth impossible.

He called at Denmark Lodge every morning. He was attending the wife of the publican whose gin-palace commanded its gates. After each visit there, he dropped in to have a chat with Mr. Inkersley; but Miss Inkersley was not to be seen. She could not look him in the face. She felt that he saw into her soul, and somehow read her secret. She shunned him like a leper. Her avoidance of him filled him with depression. It must be studied. She did not care to meet him. His presence was offensive to her. Or still worse—she was wholly indifferent to him. Indifferent!—ah, had he but known! That diurnal twenty minutes was to her a daily scourging. Each time the doctor clamoured at the door she locked herself in her room, and delivered herself to the scorpion-whip of Remorse;

face buried in pillows, palms pressed upon ears. When, as happened ever and anon, a cold grave voice rose up to her hiding-place, she moaned and shrank as under a harder stripe. It is to be feared the visitor spoke in louder tones with intent. Had he but understood he would have talked in whispers.

Once he nearly took her by surprise.

She was writing in the dining-room, at a corner of the large family table. The composition of a letter to her mother can have been no too exhilarating task, for again and again she forsook the epistle, and scribbled mechanically upon the underlying blotting-pad. She was in the act of forming fresh hieroglyphics on its pink surface, when the doctor's voice sounded at the hall-door. He had come early.

She rose up and fled.

He spun out his visit to an inordinate length. Inkersley—delighted to have a listener—boomed and thundered against the age in general and the medical profession in particular, whilst the doctor oiled the wheels of his dialectics with automatic Yeses and Noes. But his mind was elsewhere. His eye dreamed upon the objects at the far end of the table—an ink-pot, from which an ivory pen stuck out; a neat morocco blotting-book; sheets of creamy paper, some beautified by strong bold hand-writing.

Sweet objects! Sacred relics! He longed to handle them, to stroke them, to kiss them. He would, with pleasure, have stolen them. It would have been quite rational to bestow the most irrational love upon them. Ink from that little silver-topped bottle would have been nectar to his lips. But where was *she*? Why had she fled away? 'Twas a riddle that made him feel exceeding sad.

After three-quarters of an hour, he heard a fluttering of skirts in the hall, then the front-door was slammed-to. His back was to the window, and he dared not look over his shoulder. But he knew quite well that she had gone out. She had run away from him. Snatching his watch from its pocket he suddenly found that he had wasted an awful amount of time. So he left in a hurry. On his way out he was careful to pass beside the writing utensils she had abandoned and his gaze traversed the blotting-pad. That was only natural, as it was his habit to look downwards. It was also, perhaps, quite in the course of events that tint of the blotter should transfer itself to his pale face. Be that as it may, the colour with which he passed out into the sunshine was unwonted to him. The licensed victualler, smiling on the doorstep opposite, remarked how well the doctor was looking, and wondered why he should stare so hard after a certain striped

parasol disappearing in the distance. He afterwards observed to several customers what an excellent thing it would be if the kind and clever doctor should make a match of it with rich old Inkersley's daughter; such a fine handsome wench, and so lady-like and well-behaved.

"Old Inkersley" returned from the door to the dining-room. He in turn caught sight of ink-pot, writing-paper, blotter. His regards fixed themselves upon the blotter. He picked it up. He carried it to the light. He was seized with vertigo; the room swam round with him. Blurred and fattened, but yet distinctly legible, certain characters marred the fluffy pinkness of the blotter. The caligraphy was Prue's, and the words were unmistakable. In tall strong letters, the following legends stood forth, raw and rude as the flashes of conscience:

"Prue."

"Prudence?"

"Prudence Inkersley."

"Prudence Foljambe."

"Mrs. Vincent Foljambe."

"Mrs. Alfred Dolling."

The fourth and fifth signatures were almost obliterated by a coarse line drawn from left to right. The sixth was more delicately and thinly lettered. But for the doctor's entrance would she have crossed out that also?

Inkersley replaced the blotter, exactly as he found it.

The remainder of that day he spent in fasting and in silence. Prudence also fasted in silence. The sun glared hot and orange-coloured upon Denmark Lodge, but a dun cloud enveloped both its occupants. Wefts of fate had enmeshed parent and child alike in gloom. Suffering made them comrades in distress but secret guilt held each apart from other. Both feeding upon hidden woe, neither dared turn to other for sympathy or solace. Both were trembling lest they might add a second secret to their own. Both shunned the quaking-sands of hidden sorrow.

After a theoretical tea, Prudence made her way—sadly, despairingly—down the garden to the old summer-arbour. Twice she turned back towards the house, and twice she mastered her repugnance and set her face towards the garden-wall. The filmy frock of a few nights ago was a thing of ages past. Half-mourning was now not sombre enough for such a tryst. She was dressed in black. Her one adornment was a spray of artificial violets, fixed to her bosom by a knot of crêpe. The handkerchief she carried in her hand was edged with black.

At length—more sadly, more despairingly

—she returned to the house. The dining-room was wreathed in shadows. She sank down upon a chair, exactly where she had been sitting that morning when the doctor startled her away. She rested her elbows on the table, and dropped her head into her hands. Wholly preoccupied with her own grief, she thought herself alone.

An ominous sound startled her from a profound reverie. She sprang to her feet in trepidation. What fresh terror was about to unfold itself?

There was a horrible silence, then the sound was repeated; an awful sound, unearthly, yet hideously human; a gurgling, a whining; the desperate expostulation of someone being slowly strangled. It came from the green velvet sofa in the corner, near the window. A small table, supporting an india-rubber plant, stood in the way. She could see only grey shadow centring in a patch of black. The patch of black began to palpitate.

Her first impulse was to shriek; her second to dash madly from the scene. Then a burst of her old pluck awoke to shame and to nerve her. Sick with foreboding, but resolute of purpose, she strode to the window and tore aside the curtains.

Across the sofa cushion, struggling, squirming, writhing, a thing less resembling

a man than a great crushed worm, lay supine. It wore the garb of earthly beings. The soft shirt, the sailors' knot, the alpaca jacket, the laced-up shoes, were familiar objects all. But the face propped against the wall was not human; nor was it properly a face.

A lump of ragged green paper had been clewed, as by the hand of some Giant Despair, into a shape more or less spherical, and by some ghastly freak, had fixed itself into a caricature of mortal agony. Every cleft, every knot, every ridge, every hollow, that could distort the visage of the damned in hell, was woven into that tangle of livid wrinkles. The lower portion of the ball yawned into a hairy cleft, whence yellow fangs protruded; and from some part of it—anywhere; they seemed to have got screwed into the mass by chance—two eyes, plucked living from a vampire's head, glared out. They were not hazel, but emerald green; and they were rivetted upon the blank sockets of a portrait that hung above the hearth. They met them in such ecstasy of supplication that the optics of living and dead seemed to have united. It was as though lines of vision had materialized to fibres of green thread.

Prudence reeled aside, and seizing one window curtain in each hand, hung clinging

between them, stupified, stunned. She would fain have screamed; but she must have swallowed her tongue, for her mouth was a dry hollow of unmeasured extent. She would have smashed the glass of the window, but her bones must have melted; she ached with the huge weakness of a tired babe. The empty vastness of terror filled her, surrounded her, reduced her to an atom. She was a soul cast into space. The floor had gone from beneath her feet, the ceiling from above her head. All things in heaven and earth had passed away save the curse of existence, and those green stars quivering behind her back.

The sound of strangling went on until it bubbled to a climax. Then followed a long silence. She durst not have looked round, even had she not lost the power to move. How long she hung hooked to the curtains she recked not; but considerable time must have elapsed, for the gloaming deepened to night.

At length a voice called her. It arose from the shadowy corner to her left. It sounded faint from exhaustion and hoarse with pain; but it was a natural human voice, well-known and dearly loved. It did not shock her; it called her back to sensibility. "Prudence!" it said; "Prudence, my own dear child, is it you? I fear

I gave you a bad scare. Forgive me, my love!"

In an instant she was on her knees at his feet. Yes, it is her father! The fiendish monstrosity that squirmed and bubbled and gurgled has disappeared, and Herbert Inkersley, softest parent, gentlest student, tenderest pessimist, sits crouched on the old green velvet sofa. Thank God—thank God!

Even in the gloom, she could see that his face was bloodless, and his black hair dank with sweat. The redness of fever smouldered in his eyes, but the emerald sparks were gone. It was a man fresh from torture; but it was a man, and it was her father. And the demoniac—? Was the demoniac a dream, a delusion, a mad creature of the twilight? No matter; her father has returned to earth again! Why ask from whence?

In a transport of delight, she flung her arms around him and hugged him to her breast. 'Twas her father resuscitated from the dead! Until now she had not known how dear she held him. Her mouth sought his clammy face, and cleaved to it again. She gnawed him with kisses.

At last she found words. "Poor father!" she panted. "Dear father! You were ill—I thought you were dying! I thought you

were dead! Darling father!—kiss me, kiss me, to show it is you, to show me you are well again!”

He drew her up beside him on the sofa. She nestled against him as a child awaked from nightmare nestles against its nurse. Her bosom throbbed, in the wild triumph of deliverance, against his chest.

“Then you love me, Prue?” he whispered.

She answered only by kisses and the straining of her arms.

“Say you love me!” he said.

“I love you, love you, love you!” she blurted. She spoke against his cheek. They were less words than kisses.

“I don’t think you ever told me so before.”

“I don’t think I ever really knew it before. Somehow, I didn’t know anything. Now I am learning everything—to love you, to hate myself.”

“I also am learning, Prue,” he said. “I have been in many ways a fool; and, without knowing it, a bad father. Until a week ago I always thought you a plain, homely lass. But scales have fallen from my eyes. I see now how purblind I have been, and what risks I have made you run. You are beautiful; you are superb; you are fit to be a queen!”

She sobbed faintly against his cheek, completely overcome.

"Make me one promise, pet," he pleaded.

"I promise, I promise, I promise!" she murmured through sobs and kisses. "Now tell me what it is!"

"That whether I live or whether I die, you will not marry Vincent Foljambe."

"I will never see his face nor speak to him again!" she mumbled, still through kisses. "I swear it!"

"Then," he said quietly, "I can meet my doom unflinching. I can enter peacefully into perdition."

XIV

"Benedict, I blame you parsons. You don't understand your office. You gather up poor old charwomen, and give them six-pences. I, or any other blackguard, can do that. You button-hole habitual drunkards, and tell them they ought to be sober. They can do that for themselves. They know much more about it than you."

"What would you do, Inkersley?"

"I? I would do what the primitive Christians did—apply myself to man's soul, and let his body take care of itself. I would study the soul, find out about the soul. The good advice, and the soup-kitchen charity, I would leave to the parochial authorities, who are there for the purpose. I would not make my clients paupers, any more than I would make myself a Justice of the Peace. I would be neither policemen nor pedagogue. I would be priest, and that alone."

"It is the same in the Church as in trade; we must give people the wares they ask for, not those they don't."

"You make a vast mistake. You mis-

understand your market and glut it with superfluous goods. The same popular stupidity that is making the doctors a sacerdotal caste has made you a portion of the social machinery. Your spiritual functions are the last thing you remember. A cleric is made a Bishop because he has begged £50,000, or scourged little boys in a public school, or explained away in some Chair of Divinity, the writings of his Hebrew predecessors ; any of the three achievements being sufficient to unfit him for ever for his splendid calling."

"The bulk of humanity simply reject spiritual truth. It is our misfortune to move in a carnal age."

"An error, Benedict ; a fatal error. There are millions who crave for light. They ask nothing impossible ; nothing unreasonable. They would be grateful for even the least glimmer of light. They cannot find it. The world is yearning for a new revelation, a new inspiration, a new prophet—anything, anyone, to show us the old lost light."

"You would be the first to call it cant."

"From the lips of the ranter, cant ; from the lips of the prophet, truth."

"But how distinguish the one from the other ?"

"By their fruits ye shall know them."

Your fruits are temperance tracts and tickets for soup."

"Like others, we are the creatures of circumstance. What we are, yourself and your fellows make us. As with the people, so with the priest."

"Your clergy are all ordained too young, or you would know better. You are separated from the world before you have seen it, and then you go about railing at what you do not understand. Souls are parching from thirst, and you shower down leaflets—a shilling a hundred, a reduction on taking a quantity; like the quack doctor who physics all ailments out of one bottle. Children are fainting with hunger, and you offer them currant-buns. You degrade your subtle science to a mild philanthropy. Your literary propaganda is a Parish Magazine. In its luminous pages you agree with the plutocrat that wealth is a painful responsibility, and thank him obsequiously for bearing such a burden *pro bono publico*; whilst you explain to the proletarian that it is a special privilege to have a very large family and very small wages, and if the last clause of the Decalogue was not in the way you would positively be tempted to covet his happy lot; and such like."

"I am no sycophant. I have laboured all my life among the poor."

"The old confusion of terms! The old pharisaical blindness! In the kingdom of men there are scarcely rich or poor; in the kingdom of God much less. We are beggars *all*—nude souls, eaten by moral cancers. The clothes we wear are like the court robes in the fairy-tale, transparent; but the priests are the last to see through them; they have made it their duty not to. They deal out their tracts and their buns and their sermons to those who don't need them—hookwinked by themselves."

"What would you have us teach?"

"Sin."

"And do we not?"

"No; how can you, having never sinned?"

"Alas, alas; in many things we offend, all."

"Theologically only. Your propriety is simply appalling. To be an ideal priest one must have sinned blackly."

"A strange qualification."

"In itself, no qualification. Having sinned you would be able to repent."

"Some of us have already done so, in sack cloth and ashes."

"Pish! how can one repent of nothing? What you hint of is a religious game for children, like the scripture puzzles of Sunday afternoons."

"What is your idea of repentance?"

"My idea?—to drag your skeleton from

its cupboard, and kiss its fleshless jaws ; to tear your heart from its casket, and fling it, still beating, into the crucible of remorse ; to shriek yourself to death for joy as it melts in licking flame ; to moan yourself to life again, and reclaim your heart recast ; flawless, fireproof, a polished ruby. That I call repentance ; that and nothing less."

"No one would believe in your ideal priest's sincerity."

"No Respectable People. That would be one of the advantages. It would help to weed out those tares. Had Jesus lived on earth to-day He would have said, 'How hardly shall a respectable person enter into the Kingdom of God.'"

"Then, after sin and repentance, you would go forth and preach the gospel ?"

"Go forth and preach—! Not I ! Like John the Baptist, like the Master himself, I would withdraw to some silent spot, and let the sick souls come to *me*. And they would come in multitudes. Nor would I ever preach in the modern sense of the word. Preaching, as it is practised, is the crowning absurdity of all. Imagine climbing up on a pedestal twice a Sunday, and firing off platitudes at rows of harmless people in their Sunday best ! The same sheep, fed with the same dry fodder, year in and year out, forever !"

"You would end up by founding a sect. Already there are too many."

"I would found no sect, and I would build no chapel, nor in any way alter the external state of things. I would sit certain hours of each day in a consulting-room, with one chair for myself and another for the patient, and a writing-table for taking notes. And I would make myself a specialist in spiritual disease. As Darwin studied earthworms, as Lombroso studies criminals, I would study the souls of men. I would class them and tabulate them, in sickness and in health. I would apply to the spiritually wounded the spiritual unguents that alone can cure them, and send them away rejoicing."

"We do that as it is."

"Untrue. You feebly turn over your subjects to the psychologist, the alienist, the sanitary engineer, the doctor of medicine, wholly ignoring the pneuma that can only be treated pneumatically. You have tacitly abandoned your vocation, and purely of your own accord. You have made yourselves heralds of sanitation, and education, and common sense, as though we had not too much of these bugaboes already. We are surfeited with the things of the body. We are poisoned with common-sense. Bring us back the wonders of the soul, and the world will once more fall at your feet and kiss them."

The dust in your eyes is such that you can no longer see the things of the Spirit."

"You talk as all men do who have withdrawn themselves from church-membership. You wilfully excommunicate yourselves, then blame us for your own infidelity."

"As you know, I was once a church-member and communicant. I left both because I did not profit by having my faith explained away. This is the kind of thing I used to hear; 'and unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. That is to say, even the mentally afflicted were able to distinguish the Divine Powers of the Great Healer;' and so on. If the preacher had said, 'These people were possessed with devils, like some of you,' every ear would have been strained, and every heart would have beat quick. Mentally afflicted indeed! As though one had to be an imbecile to do the deeds of an imbecile! As though half the madness and all the misery of the human race did not come of our giving ourselves over to Satan! And as though we did not know it! Believe me, my dear Benedict—believe a layman with a bleeding soul—the treatment of spiritual sickness has nothing todo with hygienics, and the treatment of spirtual sickness is a lost art."

"If it is a lost art who could revive it? No lost art has ever been revived."

"Only because the others dealt with transitory things. Spiritual ailments are common to all eras, therefore spiritual sciences should be continuous and cumulative. You could have revived it yourself; but at college you were taught to explain away what everyone but the ministers of religion accepts as a matter of experience, and in your first curacy you found an attenuated system of poor-relief awaiting you. So you gave yourself over to christmas-trees, and jumble-sales, and penny savings-banks, and your lovely mystic science went overboard. You turned over your real patients to the parish doctor, and lavished endearments upon Respectable People who need no physician."

"How many, in these days, would consult a Cuthbert, or a Chadd? Ah, dear Inkersley, the world has grown old and stony hearted. The childlike faith that sent kings and barons to their confessor—to our spiritual progenitors—is scarcely to be found. Will you seriously tell me that the wealthy and the worldly, any more than the outcast and the wretched, would come to such a specialist as you imagine?"

"Decidedly they would; the duke in his carriage, the abject in his rags. They

would expect neither speeches nor sixpences. They would come to tell their secrets, and be treated, and be healed. People are dying, on every side, of secrets they dare not tell."

"Secrets?"

"Yes; beneath the worlding's broad-cloth, the lady's lace, the soldier's uniform, the toiler's duds, are secretseating into heart and soul. They go with their victim to the grave. They are never shared; not between father and child, not between husband and wife. Like slow poison, they corrode the inner self until they kill it—temporally and eternally."

The clergyman raised his mild blue eyes until they met Inkersley's delirious gaze and arrested it. He was a stout man, and elderly; but his fatness suggested a plethora of benevolence, and his features shone with that dew of endless youth which lends to the true celibate an unutterable charm. Mental peace and physical repose were in him personified. His massive thoughtful face wore a nimbus as evident as those of Botticelli's saints, but far less possible to forge. Faith, hope, charity, truth, honour, bravery, humility, were writ large in the semblance of that portly gentleman.

"What is *your* secret, my dear Inkersley?" he muttered. A broad quaint smile softened the question.

Inkersley winced as though his friend had

struck him. Gathering up the fragments of his self-control, he said huskily.

"Don't ask me, Benedict. It is too black to tell!"

"You committed a sin?"

"A crime."

"Against God, or against your neighbour?"

"I outraged God in the person of my neighbour, made in his Image and, like us all, Divine."

"Some small folly of past years that worries you?"

"The worst of all offences."

"The heaviest sin against man is murder."

"I committed murder."

"I don't believe it."

"Am I then a lunatic, or merely a liar?"

"You are one remove from a saint. One thing thou lackest."

"I tell you, Benedict, I broke the sixth commandment; and so doing I broke all. Like that man in your sermon a month ago, I am murderer, robber, adulterer, and the rest."

"And I tell you, Inkersley, that you are none of these things. I have known you during the whole of your adult life, and you are in many respects the most amiable character I have ever met."

Inkersley lifted up his voice and groaned. "O wretched man that I am!" he said, "who shall deliver me from this load of

guilt? The powers that may not forgive me refuse to condemn me. I plead Not Guilty, and every thumb goes down; I own myself a culprit, and up goes the thumb! I am a second Wandering Jew!"

"The innocent have often pleaded Guilty. It betrays a morbid lust of self-sacrifice."

Again the penitent groaned. "Am I alone in the universe?" he cried. "Have I not one true friend to curse me as he ought? What could I do that I have not done? I sought fellowship, and I found black-mail; matrimony, and I begot bastards; books—they dulled my sight for nothing. Last depth of self-abasement, I confessed to a priest, and he beatified me in my crimes. I would rather you had condemned me unheard. I have no hope left, neither in this world nor in that which is to come!"

"What was this murder?"

"I buried my brother alive."

"The robbery?"

"I stole his sweetheart, and all else that he had."

"The adultery?"

"I am father of eight children begotten in a state compared with which bigamy would be a holy union."

"My dear good friend," said the clergyman, after an interval of thought, "even though you asked it I could not give you

absolution for sins you never committed. Your brother died from natural causes. I watched his life ebb out, and decently interred his remains. He had done some shocking deeds; but let that pass. He repented on his death-bed, and left it to me to secure your forgiveness for frauds he had perpetrated upon you; *that* is a secret between you and me and the dead. You were duly and publicly married to your wife—by myself. It was I who gave names in Holy Baptism to all your sweet children, whom I love as though they were my own. During five-and-twenty years I have been your chief agent for lavishing anonymous benefactions upon the deserving and the undeserving alike; often, I suspect, to your impoverishment. Yet you send for me, and lament to me of murder, adultery, theft, you have committed! Oh, my dear Inkersley!—tell me yon sun is not glaring in the sky—tell me that white is black and black is white—tell me that life is death and death is life—!”

“Hush, Benedict!” whispered Inkersley, shuddering from head to foot—“Life is death, and death is life—That is the key to all!”

“I fear,” murmured Mr. Benedict to himself as he walked away, “that dear old Inkersley is really becoming insane.”

XV

"I have come," said Dr. Dolling, "to make a confession."

Mr. Inkersley started violently.

"A confession?" he echoed.

"Yes; I have a secret to disclose."

"A secret?"

"Yes, Mr. Inkersley; a secret."

"But, in the name of fate, why bring it to me?"

"Because you are the one man in the world qualified to hear it."

"The one man qualified—? Dr. Dolling, you are mocking me!"

"I am not here to mock you," said the doctor, "but to confess to you."

"But of what man—? of what?"

"Mr. Inkersley, I am afraid to tell you. It seems somehow unnatural—mean—shameful. It seems to brand me with a guilt that is not mine. It suggests such dreadful thoughts—how a wretch, a false friend, may creep into another's home, plotting to rob it of its brightness; to plant himself, like a parasite, where a worthier man should be; to steal his treasure, and give

nothing in return ; to be the cuckoo in the nest, and—”

“I see now!” interrupted Inkersley in horror. “I know your meaning! You want *me* to confess, and you lead off in parables! Man, if you have learnt anything, if you have guessed anything, be frank, be plain! To beat about the bush like this will drive me frantic!”

“Dear sir,” said the doctor in bewilderment, “I altogether miss your meaning, and you evidently mistake mine no less. *You*, surely, can bear no such burden on your soul.”

Inkersley had leapt to his feet in his excitement. He now dropped limp and bloodless, into a chair, and groaned deeply.

“No burden!” he repeated “No burden! My God, my God!”

“It appears,” said Dr. Dolling, shocked and puzzled, “that I have touched some wound. If so, forgive my clumsiness. I habitually speak little, because I speak so badly. This time I am forced to break silence, or I should go distracted. I can no longer bear alone the trouble preying on my mind. I *must* impart it to another; and in whom should I confide but you? You have a right to know.”

“I understand!” said Inkersley bitterly “—on the grounds of common guilt! Either

I have talked recklessly or you are a wizard!"

The doctor laughed uncomfortably.

"You seem to be in earnest," he said, "and I almost hope you are; yet I can hardly imagine you in the same plight as myself. The fact is this; for years I have been tormented by a hidden thought. I tried to treat it merely as a thought, an idea, and wrestled with it as such. But it grew more and more real, and less and less concealable, and the time has now come when it must out. From a haunting fancy it has suddenly become a stern reality; my future, my happiness, my very life depend on how my confession is met."

Inkersley looked thunder-struck.

"Apparently you speak in good faith," he murmured; "yet you lay bare my thoughts, my dreams, my terrors!"

"But, dear Mr. Inkersley," said the perplexed doctor, "*you* can have no such skeleton in your cupboard. Yet we seem to tread so upon the same ground that I fear to speak out."

"Are you man, or are you prophet," gasped the other. "Is it Dolling's voice I hear, or is it that of conscience?"

"I will tell you my trouble—cost what it may; then you can judge."

"Tell it, man, tell it! but be brief, for

pity's sake. This shilly—shallying is worse than the bitter truth!"

"You will drive me from your house!"

"No, no! What use, when in a few days all the world must know? I can bear the worst. Exposure will be better than this gnawing pain."

"Then my secret is this—I love your daughter Prudence."

Having launched his bolt he watched for its effect; and its effect was startlingly registered in the face of his hearer. Astonishment, relief, gladness—pain, remorse, despair, were in turn flashed from that worn white visage. No magic dial could have marked the workings of a baffled brain more vividly.

"In love with Prue!" stammered the father at length. "Dolling in love with Prue!—Dolling who attended her when she had the chicken-pox! Dolling who saw her through the measles! Dolling who mended her leg! After all these years—these terrible years! In love with little Prue!"

"I know it is like madness," mourned the doctor. "But what can I do? I have striven with might and main not to be such a fool. And the more I strove, the more I adored her. I dared scarcely trust myself to speak to her, to look at her. But the

pain of silence has become intolerable. My life is in her hands."

"Alas, alas!" murmured Inkersley. "Unhappy man!"

"Then I may not hope?"

Inkersley collapsed gradually into an image of desolation. His limbs sank into crouching correspondence with the melancholy of his features. Passing clammy fingers through his hair, he rolled hunted eyes over the grave face gazing sadly on his own. There was something tender, wistful, in his look; but he answered nothing.

"No hope?" questioned the doctor again. He spoke in a whisper.

"None for you in this age of respectability," said Inkersley, "if you marry her. In a week she will be a portent and an anathema!"

"The sweet and lovely Prudence!"

"A living curse! O my children—to what have I brought you! Hard enough to leave you—but to leave you cursed—!"

He buried his face in his hands, and the bones of his body shook.

"Am I dreaming?" exclaimed the doctor, "or have my ears gone mad!"

"Alas, that you were dreaming! Alas, that I were only mad!"

"Then I must go into exile, and abandon every hope of happiness?—it comes to that."

Inkersley tottered to his feet. Clutching the younger man's arm, and steadying himself as against a pillar of granite, he said in a chattering whisper :

"Abandon hope—yes—if you enter here ! No, abandon this fatal spot ! Quit this house, and never cross its threshold more. There is death in its foundations, leprosy in its walls, murder in its rafters. It shelters an enigma of crime. Something not of earth or heaven or hell lies hid in it. Something, someone, man or fiend, is rotting itself from death to life under its roof-tree. Something unimaginable is shedding putrescence upon its occupants. Those who dwell between its walls are doomed to shame unspeakable and ostracism eternal. Strong men will shrink in disgust from the children it sheltered ; they will say that they are plump as maggots are plump, and rosy as grave-worms are rosy. Its Foulness is rank as manure, and its contagion is subtle as sin. Would you make yourself a brick in its walls, a slab in its pavement, a pillar in its porch ? No ! Leave it—run from it—flee from it ! Wash your body in disinfectants, and your soul in the waters of Lethe ! Forget the criminal lunatic named Inkersley and his unhappy brood, and on your knees thank God for your escape ! "

"You speak in riddles," said the doctor,

"and they have the ring of blasphemies. To me this house is heaven. It is the home of Mr. Inkersley, the best and kindest friend I have ever had. Your wife lives here, the gentlest lady in the world. Your lovely children live here; I am lonely, and no longer young, and my kindred are all dead; the sound of their voices is music in my ears. I yearn to be their elder brother. And above all, Prudence lives here. It is sacred ground."

"Listen!" said Inkersley, "I see it is idle to argue with you so I will tell you *my* secret, I am a murderer."

"I don't believe it."

Inkersley groaned anew.

"O, this armour of respectability!" he cried; "I cannot cast it off, I cannot lay it down! No, it must be torn away, to leave me raw and bloody, a prodigy for ever! Dolling, believe me before it is too late. I swear by all that is holy that I am murderer, adulterer, robber, false witness. Whatever I possess was begotten of iniquity. I am a living crime. So now you have got the truth."

"And suppose you were such—what then?"

"Man, your respectability is your daily bread! Would you marry a felon's spawn?"

"If her name were Prudence Inkersley I would not hesitate an instant."

"The child of a beggared criminal—born of a monstrous union?"

"I ask neither money nor position. I want a wife named Prudence. I have worshipped her at a distance for ten years. If public disgrace reduced her to my level, and made her mine, I should hail it with gratitude."

"Fool!" cried the father. "Fool to be noble in this sordid age! Be a hypocrite, be a whited sepulchre, and men will honour you. They will elect you to Vestries and Town Councils and Vigilance Committees. They will dedicate clocks and statues and fountains to your memory. Lie, plunder, kill—and be crowned with laurels!"

"You are very frank for a hypocrite."

Inkersley shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say, "You are hopeless." He stood a few moments chewing his lips in silence. Then, as though arrived at a crucial resolve, he drew Dr. Dolling across the room, and brought him face to face with the portrait above the hearth.

"You see that thing?" he said.

"Yes; your dead brother."

"My brother. I murdered him, and yet he is not dead."

"You murdered him—? and yet he is not dead—?"

"I say he is not dead."

"Dear Mr. Inkersley, your mind is wandering. You are physically debilitated, and mentally sick in consequence. I can prove to you, in black and white, that your brother is dead, buried, and turned to dust. My father, who attended him from first to last, left full notes of all his cases, those referring to the late Mr. William Inkersley he kept separately, being of such an extraordinary character. They would fill a large volume, and grim reading it would be. I went through them carefully, less than a year ago, and they made my flesh creep. By your brother's timely decease the world got rid of a monstrosity. Had he not possessed the resistance of a were-wolf, he must have died many years before. It was God's very providence that your sweet wife did not fall into his talons. He was not properly a man, but an aberration of nature. Throughout his last illness he showed lycanthropic tendencies that, if published, would not be credited. I don't wonder that his memory distresses you, and I do marvel that you go on dwelling where he lived and died, and leave that portrait hanging there. But dead he certainly is. I was a mere lad at the time, but I recollect the circumstances most distinctly. I came here with my mother, when she called to offer help and condolence. I saw him lying

in his coffin in this very room. It stood just there."

Inkersley drew a silk bandana from his pocket, and mopped an oozing brow. His face had shrivelled, and his figure had contracted. Dr. Dolling found himself talking to a little old man, crushed, worn-out, forsaken, but perfectly collected.

"Listen, Dolling," he said; "listen and learn, and a few days will prove to you the truth of what I tell. My brother, as you say, lay on the trestles in this very room—just there. I came in here the night before his burial; it was midnight. Though in no sense drunk, I had been drinking, and I was wild with wicked triumph. A kind of satanic joy thrilled through me. I could have danced for joy. 'I have his fortune, and I have his girl,' said I to myself, 'I'll take a last look at him.' I tumbled away the heap of flowers from above him, cursing the hypocrites who sent them, and lifted the lid of the shell. I gazed upon him, I gloated upon him, rubbing my hands with satisfaction. 'You can't sneer me down now, William,' I said aloud. 'You can't rob me of my patrimony, and brand me for a prodigal son and a wastrel brother any more!' At the words, his mouth gave a twitch—great heaven, I can see it, I can see it! Then the left eyelid began to

tremble, and the eye slowly opened; then the right. Those eyes, those eyes! They were no longer hazel, but light green, the colour of old turquoises dug from an Egyptian tomb. They fixed themselves upon me, staring yet blind, dead yet rolling in their sockets. Slowly, slowly, as though drawn by invisible hands, he sat up, and remained sitting, with the turquoise things still rolling in his head. It entered into my mind to thrust him back, and leave him to die of suffocation; but I forbore. Suddenly—I wonder the shock did not kill me—he flung his legs over the side of the shell, and jumped down among the wreaths and crosses on the floor. The room shook with the weight of his feet, and the windows rattled till I thought they would break. A long, long while he stood motionless, with a horrible sneer on his corpse face; then he made for that door. He felt his way along the room, and guided himself by the furniture, though all four taps of the chandelier were burning. It was like a blind man, or a man drunk, or a man groping his way in the dark. He went by quick disconnected jerks. He might have been an automaton, moved by clockwork.

“He reached the staircase, and mounted it, very slowly but very loudly, bringing both feet up on each step, as small children

do ; I thought he would take years. For awhile I dared not follow him ; but when he had reached the very top of the house I seized a lamp and dashed after him. The attics—miser that he was—he had had strengthened, and shut off by an iron-plated door, intending to hide the costliest part of his wares there, and God knows what else besides. The entrance is approached by a broad ladder of seven steps, and on the top step he was standing in his shroud, his back towards me, staring into the black hole ; a bright new key sparkled in the open door. Presently he turned and fronted me, the turquoises still rolling in his waxen face. Then he backed in, and disappeared, and I heard him sink down with a scuffling sound upon the floor ; dead silence followed. Full an hour I stood there listening ; and then I did a fearful thing. I stepped softly up the ladder ; closed the door ; locked it. Then I turned and fled downstairs.

“There stood the empty shell and scattered wreaths. What was I to do ? If my deed should be discovered, I was lost. If my brother should return to his own, I was ruined. I resolved on a desperate course. In yonder closet, in that corner, lay a great heap of sham jewelry. During his last illness my brother—miser to the end—had collected round his death-bed the

samples of trash which every post brought to the office. On his apparent decease, I had ordered them to be thrown in there. I now loaded the shell with these last remnants of our senseless and dishonest trade. 'Thus let me bury the apple of discord!' I said. 'Female vanity made the Inkersleys a wealthy people, The last Inkersley shall spend wisely what his fathers filched by fraud. That brothers should have fought about such shoddy stuff!' Therewith, I replaced the lid, and rearranged the flowers. At daybreak I was at the undertaker's. I found there (some angel of darkness must have guarded me) his son, whom I knew intimately. 'Come at once,' said I, 'and solder the lid upon the shell; a fearful odour is escaping from it.' The man's name was Samuel Pickrell.

"What I suffered for my villany you may guess for yourself. What I endured as that coffin load of cardboard and tinsel was carried from the house, and I and your father stood beside it, and Benedict read those words of peace and love over it, does not matter. I have been punished—oh, I have been punished! I felt delirium coming over me, and I went to lodge with Pickrell, who was qualifying for a chemist. After a terrible attack of brain fever, my reason came back to me. Pickrell alone attended

me, and he nursed me like a woman. He kept the secret of my ravings, and I owe him a debt of gratitude; though he has been the bugbear of my life.

"As you are aware, I settled down in the nest my brother had prepared for himself and my wife. For years I kept the upper floors of the house locked up, using only the ground-floor. As my children multiplied, I opened the bedrooms one by one, though never the cursed holes beneath the roof. I believed all danger-gone, when, on the night of Hamlet's birth—it was a broiling summer night—eight years ago, I heard a foot-fall in the attics. I guessed what it was, and now I know, for it recurred again and again. I have been watching, twenty-five years, at a living tomb. So now you understand that I am worse than murderer, worse than adulterer, worse than bandit. Of all who ever breathed the air of heaven I am most abject and most God-forsaken. I am doomed to temporal and eternal death."

Mr. Inkersley's head sank upon his chest, and he again dried his brow with the bandana. During several minutes neither he nor Dr. Dolling spoke.

"I suppose you will only fly in my face," said the doctor at length, "when I assure you that there is no moribund brother upstairs. Not in the attics of this house,

but in the chambers of your own brain, does the mischief dwell."

Inkersley answered by a soft slow laugh—such a laugh! The doctor shuddered in spite of himself. He had not known that the vocal organs of man could frame a discord so unearthly.

"You are harbouring a delusion," he suggested faintly.

"Yes, yes, of course—a delusion. A delusion with a heavy foot-fall and a raucous voice!"

"It is all quite simple. Love for your sweetheart (ah, how easily I can understand it!) caused you to envy your brother, and triumph in his death, wholly against the grain of your natural disposition. In the throes of encephalitis you postulated images to which years of morbid introspection have given substance. That you actually raised the lid from the coffin, and pored upon the corpse, I do not for a moment doubt. You really wandered, in semi-delirium, up to the attic door, and locked it. It is more than likely that you actually did cram some rubbish into the shell containing the body, and that the last samples of his trade were buried with the dead; extraordinary things are often found in coffins. But the rest is pure hallucination. Your wretched brother —"

"Hush, Dolling, hush! Keep that jargon for the *Lancet*, and don't waste any more breath. *I have seen him!*"

"Seen him!—when, where, how?"

"Here in this room, where he once lay on the trestles, on Sunday night five weeks ago, in his moth-eaten shroud."

"And he spoke to you in a raucous voice?"

"He spoke to me in a voice that made those gas-globes ring."

"But to what purport?"

"He promised to be a guest at my silver wedding, on the last day of this month. *You will see him for yourself!*"

"Oh, Mr. Inkersley!"

"Would you have my daughter now!"

"Now more than ever."

"Then woo her and wed her. She is the offspring of a fratricide, and worse than base-born."

"Dear friend," said Dr. Dolling, linking his strong arm through that of the monomaniac, "take a brave step. Come with me now and search the attics."

Inkersley's skin assumed the tint of jade, and his hair rose upon his head.

"Come with you now—!" he hissed. "Search the attics—! The moment the key turns in that lock I die!"



XVI

On the same afternoon Prudence received a brief and formal note from Dr. Dolling. He requested an interview, important, but on some topic not specified. It took place the following morning.

For one hour the Miss Inkersley that had been came back to earth. She met the doctor with frigid affability. She was even more inaccessible than of old. A marble statue had concealed itself in striped washing-frock, tall collar, long cuffs. Throughout the interview she sat leaning forward upon her chair, in the young-man attitude of yore, one leg crossed upon the other. Her head, inclined in courteous but self-possessed attention, showed the blue length of a geometrical parting; not a hair was out of place. Her splendid shoulders were thrown well back, so that her waist, slim and supple, curved in deeply from behind. Her large but satin-white hands sustained her left knee, the long fingers, with their curled-back tips, laced firmly together. If there were girl soldiers, the smartest lady lieutenant, in the presence of her commanding

officer, might appear just so drilled, so spotless, so disconcertingly polite, so coolly independent. Fully convinced of the hideousness of her attire, she had, to render it perfect, bought a pair of old-maid boots—kid, with glazed toes and elastic sides. She kept one long arched foot in prominence; and a slight movement thereof, marked by the stiff rustle of her starched skirt, alone betrayed any emotion on her part. She opined the whole disguise of dress and manner fatal to admiration and final to love. That was her wish.

But what would Worldly Wisdom say? 'Twould tell you, Prudence, that here you show yourself a woman of the women. But even Worldly Wisdom cannot make a woman know the mind of man. Between the Sexes lies a chasm that has never yet been crossed; for not philosophy nor love, not imagination nor marriage, can bridge that yawning gulf. Whilst woman is victim to a fatal sense of fitness, man feasts on paradox and drinks himself drunk on contrasts; that is the most Experience can aver. Of course you won't believe it, Prue. The wretch who stands before you could for little swoon. In frills and flounces you would be lovely to the eyes of ladies. In prim housemaid uniform you are deadly to the peace of Alfred Dolling.

"I am sorry to—to obtrude myself upon you, Miss Inkersley," said the doctor, "but it is absolutely necessary that I should speak out plainly; I must."

"I am most pleased to see you," she answered calmly.

"Possibly you have already—you have already inferred what I desire to say."

"I believe I have; and my father seems to agree that you should consult with me."

"I am deeply grateful to him—and to you—whatever you may decide to—to do. Such a state of mind cannot be borne in silence."

"I am fully of your opinion; the silence must be the most trying feature in cases of that kind."

"A secret trouble is a moral ulcer. It grows deeper, and larger, and more difficult to cure."

"Exactly, exactly. The secrecy is the worst part of the whole thing. My poor father evidently thinks so himself; and I can endorse your words from my own experience. I also have suffered profoundly in that respect."

"You also? Then there is hope, in spite of Mr. Inkersley's objections!"

"Hope, Dr. Dolling? I should be sorry indeed to think that there were none! And as for poor father's fancies, you must not pay too much attention to them. He

requires to be coerced for his own good. You know how obstinate he is; and mother is far too lenient with him. I have tried to persuade him to a right way of thinking, but really you can do much more than I. His disparagement of doctors is mere talk; he believes in you implicitly."

"Your words seem to—to instil new life. They fill me with—with—I don't know how to express it—with something that I can't describe. I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Whatever I can do to foster the new life, as you express it, I shall. Already I have made my father a solemn promise—"

"Can it be possible?"

"Can it be possible! Why not? What have I ever done that you should think me deficient in filial duty?"

"In this matter, dear Miss Inkersley, I can scarcely see a duty. It is a question of your sentiments; and I must say you have hitherto disguised them very cleverly."

"Sentiments and duty for once go hand in hand. I consider it folly and weakness to waste blandishments on anyone; but surely, Dr. Dolling, you cannot seriously doubt that I love my poor dear father?"

"Your *father*?"

"To be sure; my father. He is, I take it, the subject of our conversation."

"But Miss Inkersley," gasped the doctor, going from white to scarlet and from scarlet to white, "you have misunderstood me! Ah, how cruelly you undeceive me, how bitterly you disappoint me!—It was not of Mr. Inkersley but of—of myself that I was speaking."

"Of *yourself*—? Dr. Dolling—!" She rose as though to leave the room, an image of scornful surprise.

The doctor rose also, and intercepted her. Desperation unloosed his tongue.

"Don't leave me like this!" he pleaded. "Don't be indignant with me. I know quite well that I am beneath you. I know that I am old and plain and uninteresting, and naturally you cannot care much for me. But love on one side only might count for something. I worship you! I adore you! What you touch is sacred, and where you tread is holy ground. I didn't expect that you could love me in return. I thought you might put up with me—yes, I thought you might. I hoped you might even grow attached to me, with time. The heart a handsome boy might steal suddenly—I confess it would seem more natural—I thought I might win gradually, by years of tender devotion."

"Dr. Dolling, you amaze me! What *do* you mean?"

"Simply what I say—that I love you—that I have loved you ever since I knew you. When you were a mere schoolgirl, my heart beat at the sight of you. I yearned for you—as—as my sister—my child—I know not what!"

"You astound me!"

"You have been my thought by day, my dream by night, for years and years. I have been content to live, because you breathed the same air and walked upon the same earth. I have begun each day with gladness, because the same sun that awakened me awakened you. I have lain down in peace each night, because the same darkness covered us both. You have been the guiding star and ruling spirit of a lonely life. You have been ever present to me, like a messenger of God. For years I have been guiltless of any selfishness, of any untruth, of the smallest false pretence, simply because the thought of you cannot dwell where these things are. I have spent half my time, and more than half my income, among the poor and wretched, simply because I knew it was what you, in my place, would have done. Though, judged by age, I might be your father, you have been to me a kind of sacred mother. I have tried to follow your example, to imitate you, to mould my life on yours. You have

taught me the meaning of uprightness, self-sacrifice, truth. If there is any good in me I owe it all to you."

"You have always treated me with the utmost indifference."

She spoke between clenched teeth, in order not to shriek. She reared herself erect against the back of a chair, in order not to fall grovelling at his feet.

"From a sense of duty only," he replied. "I never entertained the least notion of an avowal; it would have seemed too ridiculous. Your beauty struck me dumb in your presence, and your innocence, your utter truthfulness, appalled me. My highest ambition would have been to suffer, if necessary to die, for your sake, unknown and unthanked. But the last few days something has happened to you or to me. One of us has changed, and I can hide my love no longer. I somehow feel that you are slipping from my sight—that you will be gone—that you will be snatched away—and—and then I could endure life no longer. I could have worshipped you in silence for ever—but that another should steal you away! Oh, Miss Inkersley, call me audacious, call me insane, think of me what you will—but I had to speak or die."

"Why, we scarcely know each other. We are practically strangers."

"Ah, by what strange fatality!—by what sad perversity! Can we not begin to know each other now?"

"No, it is too late."

"Too late?"

"Too late."

"Then you give me no hope?"

"No hope."

The doctor took up his hat. He halted a moment, resting himself against the handle of the parlour door:

"And the promise you made to Mr. Inkersley—what was it?"

She hesitated, standing savagely erect, trying to look him in the eyes, longing to tell him all. Impossible. Having once lied, she must lie for the rest of time. She lied accordingly; lied by words of truth:

"That I would never see a certain man again—already I have broken my word."

"I am crushed," he said. "I have been cruelly deluded."

"I am sorry; but it can't be helped. I have no choice."

"And you will not speak to me again?"

"Not on this subject, most certainly."

The door of Denmark Lodge closed upon the doctor.

A dejected heart-broken man slouched away into the sunlight.

A stately lady dashed herself prone upon

a bed that rocked. She beat her clenched hands against the wall. She tore her hair. She ripped off her collar. She shredded her bodice with bleeding fingers. She kicked with her feet like a bad child in a passion. She sobbed and howled till the pillow was dark with her tears. She lay convulsed, until she had no more tears to shed, no more power to sob, no more epithets of hate wherewith to brand herself; until grief had burnt out its fuel, and remorse had expended its venom, leaving her weak, benumbed, stupified; scarcely credulous of the tragedy enacted, scarcely conscious of the cause of her despair, but fully sensible of having been justly punished. Yes, justly punished; and punishment well merited is always the hardest to bear. No sweet oil of martyrdom mollifies its stripes. 'Tis suffering without alloy or solace.

"And what did you say to Dr. Dolling?" inquired Mr. Inkersley of the blubbered Hebe who sat down beside him to dinner of which neither partook.

"I told him not to speak to me again. Let us never speak of it again."

"H'm. It seems a pity. He is a splendid fellow, and I'm afraid he will be badly cut up. But on the whole it is better so; indeed you have taken the only possible course.

He will feel it terribly; but in this world we should not build on anything. Anticipation is everything, and realization nothing. Expectation and retrospect combine to make fools of us. There is no such thing as present happiness. You are both, in fact, spared some melancholy disillusion, and on the whole you ought to feel thankful, Prue—"

And thus he rubbed brine into her wails. He agreed, however, to bury the episode in oblivion; and he was good at keeping secrets.

From her bedroom window Prudence watched the gloaming thicken among the bushes by the garden-wall. She knew what was lurking there. She guessed—and rightly—that an evil being was blaspheming there. She found vicious joy in picturing someone's thwarted expectations. She felt spiteful satisfaction in the thought of his impotent fury; but the pleasure was leavened with fear. Whilst she mentally feasted on the disappointment of him who had murdered her bliss, the still small Voice kept whispering a galling truth: If it takes two to make a bargain, two also are required to dissolve a contract.

How she hated Foljambe. How she

execrated him. How she loathed herself for having played at sweethearts with him.

The new-born kitten phase—that velvet dream—had passed away; her eyes were opened. She grasped now that it was not by the man but by herself she had been bewitched. She saw herself, no longer a spinster governess, but a large, lovely, and dainty girl; one to be cherished and petted and indulged; one meet to be a sound man's idol, meet to be Dr. Dolling's wife—her very ideal of conquest. And she saw Foljambe, shabby, bilious, debauched; a broken-down gentleman, a seedy black-guard; a low adventurer, a scamp of the first water.

Had she been feeble-minded she might have pitied herself. Being strong-minded she could but revile herself. And properly so; for had not conscience, throughout the garden-wall flirtation, condemned her in its hoarsest whispers? The violent discovery of her own beauty, the sudden awakening to her own value, had come as a moral shock—dazzling, intoxicating, infatuating. But by herself alone she had been deceived, and not by Foljambe. All along, she had despised him in her heart. And yet she pledged herself to that outcast. By word of mouth, by pen and ink, by touch of lips and hand (she sickened now to think

thereon), she had pawned herself and her sweetness to that most execrable of men. And from what motives! From gratitude to the wretch who made her know her worth; from admiration of the girl with whom she had fallen over-head-and-ears in love; from contradiction to a poor crippled father and a silly maudlin mother! Like many wise and prudent people in all ages, she was forced to confess herself a fool.

Small wonder, then, that she sought solace in exasperation of the reprobate. Already she had written to him, discarding him absolutely and in the crudest terms. With angry glee she had penned his dismissal. She had couched it in such language, she considered, as to obliterate in his mind the least hope of reconciliation. He could but grind his teeth, curse his sweetheart and his luck, and slink back to his dark life and his mysterious haunts. His reply she had not received; there had scarcely been time as yet. And in any case, what did it matter to her what he thought or what he wrote? She was done with him for good and all; let him scribble himself weary—so much the better. She would not so much as read his ebullitions. She would return them unopened, or throw them in the kitchen stove unread.

Prudence, Prudence, says the relentless

Voice, again you are deluding yourself, and it is to be feared you know it. The creature lurking in yon purple shadows is master of a cruel claw. A fat and hairy hand, with idle pointed fingers, has taken firm hold upon your wrist. Even as you sit there, brooding in the twilight, it grips and shakes you. It draws you contrary to your inclinations, and dominates your will. In fact you have now no will. To-morrow morning, early, you will wander—sadly, despairingly—down the garden to the splintered greenhouse. You will remove a flower-pot, and beneath it you will find a letter. You will take up the letter, and bring it here, to this your bed-chamber. With your heart in your mouth, you will open it. You will read it through and through, again and again. You will blister it with your tears. You will lie and prevaricate in order to obey its command. And eventually you will obey its command.

XVII

The family are home once more, having protracted their sojourn by the sea to the last day and last hour possible. They scramble, sun-burnt, boisterous, laughing, shouting, squabbling, into Denmark Lodge, about four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, and the following Friday is fixed for the silver wedding feast.

Prudence had a tempting tea set out for the returning exiles, whose home-coming, by the by, she had retarded with the ingenuity of a consummate letter writer. It was an exceptional spread. Cold meats, tarts, cheese cakes, custards, were flanked by party-coloured turrets of blancmange that wobbled sweetly as the children stamped about the room. Dahlias and gladioli nodded their showy heads in time, and a small vase of scarlet geraniums stood prominent at each corner of the board. "You see, mother dear," simpered Prudence, "your pet geraniums have not been forgotten. They are flowering still! If they had depended on father they would have died of thirst; but I made them my

morning and evening care. Come girls, come Hamlet, you must be hungry after your long hot journey. Come and have your tea."

But the children seemed inclined rather to feast upon their sister than upon the aids to indigestion her forethought had prepared. It was an exceptional Prudence. They had never seen it before, and they loved it at first sight. It was a huge beauty, ten years younger than the late Miss Inkersley, exquisitely draped in translucent stuff that permitted little peeps of bare young lady here and there. It had a dear little crimped curl upon each temple, and another over each ear. There was a little cooing laugh in all its words; the language was Prue's but Prue seemed to have swallowed a baby. It exhaled sweet smells from its clothing. The children were enraptured. In this gigantic flirt, in this expensively dressed doll, they discovered one of themselves: a true sister. With loyal enthusiasm they rose to the occasion. First, because she was so inconveniently tall (that, like some other qualities, could not be changed), they enthroned her upon the old green velvet sofa, then, from Doris to Hamlet, each one saluted her with a solemn kiss of homage. The erstwhile Dictatress is created an elective Queen. Mrs. Inkersley stood apart, weep-

ing tears of maternal approbation, and saying really beautiful things about Brotherly Love, and Parting, and Reunion, and the defunct Uncle William, and how we ought always to be Prepared to Meet our End; et cetera, et cetera. She blew her nose eight times—a salute for each of her offspring—and no doubt enjoyed herself in her own poetic way. The head of the house stood shuffling from foot to foot, and looked extremely uncomfortable.

At length Prudence got the family to work around the table, and once seated there, they made up royally for lost time. Seaside hunger was strong upon them, and they munched themselves sticky in silence. Mrs. Inkersley's emotions in no way interfered with her appetite, though she sighed weepishly at intervals, just for consistency's sake, and satisfied the ritual of tears by repeated wipings of her nose. When the period of general repletion had been arrived at Prudence played her trump card.

"I have a surprise for you all," she said. "You know to-day is my twenty-fourth birthday. Of course, being a confirmed old maid, I don't encourage people to talk about that. But I thought the first night at home would seem dull after all your pleasuring, and the famous Muckrake Minstrels are performing in the Town Hall.

So what do you think I have done? I have taken tickets for the whole family, and we are all going to be there at seven o'clock sharp. There now!"

A scream of delight went up from the children; a murmur of dissent came from Mrs. Inkersley; a growl of disgust from the father.

"What, more racketing!" he said; "after nearly three weeks of it, day and night."

"I have'nt had much racketing, have I, father dear," cooed Prudence. "You and I have spent a decidedly quiet time together, I should say. A little innocent fun will do us both good. We want livening up."

"*We!*" shouted Mr. Inkersley. "*We* want livening up! And do you really imagine that *I* would countenance such ribald tomfoolery? Girl, I thought you knew me better!"

"Oh, of course," faltered Prudence, with a wounded air, "if you mean to throw my kindness in my face like that I have no more to say. As you didn't even remember it was my birthday, I mustn't be surprised if you refuse to celebrate it at my expense." Her words implied, "I am snubbed again; but it doesn't matter. It is only I."

"I confess I quite forgot about it," said the father, abashed. "To-morrow I'll buy you a present Prue. You shall have whatever you please."

"Oh, don't trouble about me, father dear," she answered. "It is of no consequence. Let it pass."

"Prudence, you know quite well I didn't mean to hurt you," he blurted, beginning to perspire. "You wilfully misunderstand me."

"Oh no, I don't misunderstand you in the least," she answered. "Of course I am in the wrong. It was absurd of me to suppose you would remember the natal day of your firstborn child, especially as she had the misfortune to be born a girl. Pray forgive me, dearest father." There was a warning catch in her voice.

"My darling!" cried Inkersley, jumping up and clasping his arms around her, "for pity's sake don't talk like that! Your mother and sisters will think I have been beating you, or some such nonsense."

"If you did," murmured Prudence, with exquisite meekness, "I should only turn the other cheek. I am learning obedience in the school of adversity."

"Oh Prudence, how *can* you talk so!" exclaimed the horrified father, kissing the soft cheek in question, "when you know how I love and cherish you. You are cruel Prue!"

Prudence here resorted to her latest weapon of war. Unearthing a small scented

pocket-handkerchief, she unfolded it ostentatiously, and delicately dabbed her eyes. This was the climax, and the stroke was well timed. Mrs. Inkersley promptly went off into loud sobs, and several of the girls began to sniff.

"There now!" wailed the father, in despair—"you have done it, Prue! You've set them all off snivelling, and they won't stop for an hour. Was ever such a wretched man as I? Were ever such children? You are all covered with electric buttons, and one can't touch you without raising an alarm!"

Prudence shook convulsively in his arms.

"You used to be the only sensible one of batch, Prue," he moaned; "and now, upon my word, you are worse than the rest."

A heart-rending sob burst from Prue's diaphanous blouse, a chorus of sobs from the blouses of her sisters.

"Oh, I apologise," wailed the father. "I humbly ask pardon, though I'm sure I don't know for what. I suppose I *am* a brute, and a child-beater, and all that, though I can't see it myself (we never see our own shortcomings), and I will do anything you like in the way of penance. What *can* I do? I will even go to that vicious vulgarity in the Town Hall, if that will satisfy you. I will Prue, I will try and bear it!"

Prudence removed the cambric terror from her eyes, and laid her head back on her father's shoulder. By a kissing sound she drew his lips to hers. The sigh she uttered was one of profound relief. The first move in her plot had succeeded.

In the glow of the sunset they all sallied forth for the Town Hall; the mother and Hamlet leading the procession, the six blondes capering behind like six white bleating lambs, the father and Prudence bringing up the rear. The two maid-servants had been endowed with eighteen pence a-piece, and sent on in advance.

Neither father nor firstborn had the slightest intention of seeing the performance through. Both were planning a retreat. Mr. Inkersley's tactics was to escort his rebels to their seats, place them in charge of some acquaintance, (All the World and his Wife would be there; it was a Benefit Night) and then retreat suddenly. But he was reckoning without his daughter, and woman's wits are ever readier than man's.

Their road to the Town Hall lay through a slummy locality, where ragged urchins chased flea-bitten dogs over spat-upon pavements, and workless people loafed forbiddingly around greasy doorways. No cabs, no trams, no omnibuses passed that

way, nor any decent citizens. Now Prudence, during the afternoon, had casually complained of headache, and just as they entered upon the purlieu in question the head-ache unfortunately became splitting. Nigger minstrels were out of the question. One course only could be pursued. There was no alternative, and she would listen to no suggestions: father must go on, and conduct the white-robed fairies to their destination, whilst she—self-sacrificing now as always—must turn back, and spend a solitary evening at home. Inkersley knew that argument was futile, and might only make the tyrant's headache worse. So, grinding his teeth in dumb despair, he strode forward like a martyr to the stake, leaving Prudence to return—meekly, resignedly—towards Denmark Lodge. The second move in her plot has worked out to perfection.

The Inkersley family, whilst spreading themselves out upon velvet fauteuils in the gas-lit Town Hall, took no special thought for Prudence. Prue, with a headache, had gone home to lie down; they were awfully sorry, but it was Prue's traditional province to play Cinderella. Had not a mile and a half of Grimville lain between, they might

have witnessed a startling performance. The antics of the black-faced histrions in front would have fallen woefully flat. The white figure that had detached itself from their ranks was cast for a thrilling rôle in a scene of tragi-comedy.

Prue stood listening among smoky bushes by a crumbled wall, motionless as a statue in a grove. Echoes of sunset still flickered mossily upon the roof and chimneys of the old house, and in the gaunt tree-tops of the park; but thunderous clouds blotched the vault above and blurred the dawning stars. Chill breeze, such as often follows upon a stifling day, sighed through the black branches, and stirred the thin garments of the girl. She shivered in that sense of exposure peculiar to autumn twilight, when the thermometer falls rapidly; a painful consciousness of the body of flesh and its perils; a morbid readiness to be put to shame; an absurd predisposition to blush or blench or tremble at the lips; an irrational craving to laugh or cry or dance or quarrel; the fluttering shyness of a child, actuated by an unruly adult ego. A dangerous psychic state, commonly ascribed to insufficiency of clothing, yet purely occult in origin. In short, the soul's nudity.

There are minutes that might condone the delinquencies of years. Seven such

passed over Prudence, turning her limbs to marble and her heart to ice. Her powers were already strung up to breaking-strain of suspense, but the limpness of fear relaxed her wrists and ankles as a footstep crushed the fallen leaves beyond the wall. She knew herself at the mercy of the merciless. A moment later, a bilious face loomed above the brick-work, a fat form poised itself upon the coping, dropped with surprising agility upon its fat pointed toes, and advanced towards her. Triumph, tyranny, menace, swelled the face and the body of Vincent Foljambe. He seemed a bag of human wickedness, full to bursting. He bore down slowly, deliberately, upon his prey. 'Twas a tawny tom cat descending upon a snared and snowy dove.

"So, my love," he sneered, "you thought it better to meet me, after all?"

Her lips quivered, but no words were audible.

"What, lost your tongue, eh?" he cackled. "I'll soon help you to find it!"

Still silence.

"Come!" he said abruptly; "give us a kiss, and see what effect that will have."

She recoiled in disgust.

"What, deaf as well as dumb? Can't you hear what I say?" he raised his voice. "I tell you, give me a kiss. Come,

turn up that pretty mouth this instant. If you don't it'll be the worse for you!"

She yielded up cold lips to his will. He gripped her in his arms, and kissed her ravenously; his breath was rank with brandy. She turned sick as his moist moustache wetted her face and his hard bristles scratched it. She shrank feebly in his grasp, and prayed mutely to God to deliver her. But she knew that resistance was vain. By an elaboration of falsehoods she had set herself beyond the reach of earthly aid; and Foljambe was drunk enough to be reckless but sober enough to be dangerous.

At length he loosed his hold, and pushed her from him brutally. She almost fell.

"So you're beginning to learn obedience, eh?" he sniggered. "Thought you would. Excellent thing obedience, 'specially in a wife."

"I shall never be your wife, Mr. Foljambe," she ventured faintly.

"Ho! what! you won't, won't you, Miss Inkersley?" retorted the bully "We'll soon see to that! You've found your tongue already; you're learning common sense. But come now, I'm open to reason. Tell me the meaning of that blamed insulting letter you wrote me—and don't lie!"

"It simply means this; that either I must give you up or break my father's heart."

"Ho, ho! your father's heart, eh? A fine lot of black stuff would trickle out of it if it did get broken! What's your father's blamed rotten old heart to me?"

"It is a great deal to *me*."

"Bah, you silly fool! Your father, indeed! My stars! if you knew as much about the old blackguard as I do you would be ashamed to call him your father."

"I have made him a solemn promise never to speak to you nor see your face again."

"Oh, ho! you made him a solemn promise did you. Well, don't go worrying yourself about that, then; you're a nailer at breaking 'em! You may just as well perjure yourself to him as to me, eh?"

"I have lied to him enough for your sake already. If he found us now—"

"Bah, bah! Don't you bother about him finding us! I've got him on a string."

"What *do* you mean?"

"What I say. I've got old Inkersley on toast."

"You didn't talk like that when he—when he kicked you out of doors!"

"P'r'aps not; but *I* have the whip-hand now?"

"The whip-hand?"

"Yes, over him and over you. I'm going to have him for a pa-in-law; I'm going to do your family that honour. He is going to

acknowledge me, and he is going to maintain me—for your sweet sake of course, darling; and the latter's the most important item of all."

"I don't fear your threats." She was nigh to drop with terror.

"Ho! you don't, eh?"

"You think you can intimidate me into——"

"Bah, bah! I shan't stop to intimidate you; I'm going to coerce you."

"Coerce me—? Mr. Foljambe!"

"It's no brag, my beauty. I mean what I say. You've tried to shuffle out of your bargain, and I'm going to force you to keep it."

"Force me?"

"Yes, force you—so no more talk! My programme's made up. The lane's handy, and there's a cab waiting for us at the corner. This romantic spot was made for an elopement. I've got a fit of elopements on me to-night, and I want you to join in the game, like a good dutiful wife. You needn't mind appearances. The cabman won't tell any tales; he's a friend both of me and of your loving pa. He knows how to manage horses, for he used to drive a hearse; so you needn't be afraid of accidents. And he knows how to manage ladies too; for he's a family man himself.

If you're anxious to do the hysterics trick, or anything of that sort, he'll soon calm you down, my lass, as he's a bit of a doctor. Come now, sharp! We've wasted too much time as it is."

Prudence stood petrified. It dawned upon her that she was the victim of a devilish conspiracy. Horror lent energy to her speech.

"Go with you!" she gasped; "go with you now! Are you mad or are you only drunk?"

"I'm sane and I'm sober," replied Foljambe, "and you've got to obey. Come along, now! We can do the fond farewell business after the honeymoon, when we return to pa."

"Return to father—! after the honeymoon—! Why, he would kill me and trample on my dead body!"

"Oh no! Not he! Not a bit of it! He has trampled on dead bodies enough. He won't try on that game any more!"

"You think you can frighten me with ghost stories." She stood erect, and spoke with scorn, but her teeth chattered in her head.

Foljambe raised his arm, and extended a sharp fore-finger towards the roof of Denmark Lodge.

"Look at those windows up there," he said meaningly.

"She followed the line indicated, and scanned the mysterious dormers. Sparks of the afterglow still smouldered in their panes.

"Well, what about them?" she questioned in a dying-away voice. A network of funeral crêpe seemed to be weaving itself around her.

"Were you ever in those attics, my love?"

"N—no—I think not."

"Well, p'r'aps I was. P'r'aps that was why the old man kicked me out of doors, as you so delicately express it."

"I didn't know it," faltered Prudence, full of ghastly expectancy.

"No, I guess not. But of course you're aware what your loving pa keeps up there?"

"N—no."

"Well, I do! Twig, eh?"

The imbecility of despair settled upon Prudence. Will, hope, memory, reason, alike forsook her. She is fairly in the claws of the tiger. She could only wring her hands, and moan like a lost child, "What shall I do? what shall I do?"

"Do?" thundered Foljambe, seizing upon the moment of weakness. "Do! Why, come with me at once, this instant! That's what you've got to do!"

"But I can't go like this! You will surely let me find a cloak?" she pleaded.

"And the old man, eh?"

"Father is out. Everyone is out, as I promised they should be. I am at your mercy. I trusted to your sense of honour."

"Well, you can get the shawl, but I go with you," conceded the blackmailer.

She set off towards the house, Foljambe close on her heels. Hope revived at the nearer sight of home, and she quickened her pace. Foljambe, though waxing momentarily more drunk, noted this. "Not so fast you jade!" he snuffled. "I see I must put the break on." At the word "break" his hand fell stinging upon her left upper arm, just above the elbow. For a moment his fingers sought the tenderest part beneath the filmy sleeve, then closed upon her flesh until the sharp nails almost met in it. A shriek of pain formed itself in her throat; but she bit her lip in time, and it issued only in a piteous moan. He chuckled gleefully, and wrung the flesh anew; but no sound escaped her. And thus he led her, walking slowly, wringing and twisting at her quivering arm the while, the remaining length of that interminable path. Twice he stopped to gloat upon her as she writhed in unresisting agony. She had not known that there could be anguish so excruciating or man so brutal. Alas, poor Prudence, there are many things you do not know!

XVIII

In the kitchen—now almost dark—he let her go. He sank, vast, flabby, terrible, into a rocking-chair.

“Give me a drink you slut,” he commanded.

Pain and indignation had quickened her faculties; she snatched wildly at the idea of the drink. She had heard it said that whereas much drink makes a man dangerous, a little more renders him harmless as a babe. She remembered some cooking-brandly in a cupboard. Reaching it down, she filled a tumbler half full, and handed it to Foljambe. Already fuddled, and beguiled by the darkness, he tossed it off at one gulp.

“Hah, that’s better,” he snuffled, smacking his lips. “Y’r’ ’mproving rapidly. All good dutiful wives mix th’r husbands’ drinks. Soon lick y’ int’ shape! And now we’ll go ’n look for that blamed macintosh. Pickrell ’ll wonder what we’re up to, ho ho!”

Prudence was racking her brains for a fresh means of delay, wondering how long it would be before the brandy did its work, repining inwardly that it had not been vitriol

by mistake, when her ear caught the sound of someone moving about the house. Was it imagination or was it fact? Nay it was no delusion, for immediately a familiar voice—O angel's voice! O tongue of heaven!—hailed her by name, hailed her loud and clear: "Prudence, Prudence, Prudence!"

It was her father—! It was her father—! her dear, noble, sainted father, seeking her, as of old, in the gloaming!

The effect on Foljambe was extraordinary. "The devil!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet in bemuddled dismay.

"Prue, Prue, Prue!" the call swelled louder, and sounded more near.

Prudence stood as though paralysed. A transport of joy and hope beset her on the one hand; a blast of trepidation and shame benumbed her on the other. What will her father think when he finds her? What is the only inference he can draw, the only conclusion to which he can come? that she has lied to him as never woman lied before. That she has forsworn herself to the very profundity of perjury. That she has deceived him with a heartlessness unequalled in the dealings of parent and child. That she is the meanest, vilest, most double-faced changeling who ever bare witness to ingratitude far sharper than a serpent's tooth. She madly yearned to flee away; to seek

some dark and desolate retreat where she might hide herself and her unmerited disgrace; to there lie down and weep herself to death, far from the gaze of mortals and the light of day. She would certainly have attempted flight, shunning her deliverer with deeper terror than her persecuter—and what then? What about the bloated monster snorting by the window? What about his wide-awake hat lying on the floor, and the brandy-bottle and the glass upon the table, and the stench of spirits in the air?—dawning evidences, all, of duplicity and depravity in herself, unimaginable and unforgivable!

“Prudence, Prudence, Prudence! Where are you, Prue?” this time the voice came faint and from a distance.

“It is father!” she panted. “He is looking for me! He has gone out to look in the garden!” She gripped her throat with both hands. She was suffocating.

“Let’m look!” snorted Foljambe. “Who cares?” Although now thoroughly intoxicated, he appeared to care extremely. He stared, stupidly but anxiously, at the doors, at the window, at the distracted girl.

“Prue, Prue! where are you?” The voice is close at hand, and drawing nearer. It is just outside the garden door.

A spark of vitality struck the girl, and waked her from her trance. That inspira-

tion, begotten of crisis and brought to birth by desperation—that inerrancy which is preternatural, and transcends all genius—that energy, which if it flashed for more than a few seconds would consume its agent—that power to think and to act like lightning, which comes once only in the lifetime of a few only, that overpowering afflatus caught her suddenly, and lifted her above herself. Grasping the goggling Foljambe's arm almost as fiercely as he had grasped hers, she dragged him across the kitchen. "The cellar!" she hissed. "Quick, quick! In an instant we are lost!"

Flinging open a door in the corner, she thrust the drunkard into the black cavity disclosed. "Take care!" she whispered between set teeth. "There are nine steps!" She kicked his hat after him as she spoke.

Foljambe accomplished two steps of his descent, missed his footing, and fell scuffling to the bottom. She heard his smothered oaths as he tripped, grappled to recover himself, then pitched forward headlong. But silence followed. At that moment Mr. Inkersley entered upon the scene. He dashed towards the cellar door in alarm. Almost total darkness filled the kitchen.

"Take care father, take care!" screamed Prudence. "You will be down too!"

"Be down too! Girl, what are you doing

here? What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"The potatoes!" cried Prudence, with a loud quavering laugh. "Cerulia had put them at the top of the steps, and the whole sackful went down to the bottom. It was you startled me."

"Why, I thought you had killed yourself—groping about in the dark like this! You used to be so careful, and now you are as reckless—! Get a light, Prue, and I will fetch the potatoes up again. But—mercy o' me—! what a horrible smell of spirits!"

"It is brandy. I felt so ill, I took a little. That is what I was doing here. I was just going to put the bottle on the shelf above the steps when you gave me such a start. I nearly fell."

"A light, quick, Prue!" cried the father impatiently.

"Why trouble about it?" she reasoned. "It was Cerulia's fault the sack fell; let her pick it up again. Let us go to the dining-room." Every moment she expected to hear Foljambe groan or shuffle.

"I shall pick up the potatoes first," said Inkersley doggedly; "then we will go to the dining-room." Alas, that dreadful habit of mental concentration! The spilt potatoes were now his one thought in life; and the spilt potatoes were Vincent Foljambe.

"But where are mother and the girls?" asked Prudence, with a view to diverting his thoughts.

"Giggling at that bosh you sent us to. Get a light first, then I'll tell you how I got away."

"I will go and look for a candle," moaned Prudence. "Oh my poor head!" Not her head, but her heart, was ready to fly in splinters. She made for the door.

"Tush!" said her father, "don't go. I am sure I can see a dip yonder on the dresser."

"On the d—dresser?" stammered Prudence in surprise. "So there is! I am so stupid to-night. Oh, my poor head!"

The common tin candlestick stood out, wickedly distinct, from the surrounding shadows. There was no help for it; she took up the torch that was to illuminate her deeds of darkness, and bore it to her father.

"There are no matches here," he grumbled, fumbling in the tin dish.

"No matches? dear me!" said Prudence joyfully; "I will go and look for some; there are lots in the china-pantry."

She set off at a run. Her idea was to reach some spot at a sufficient distance, and there feign sudden collapse. First she might upset a tray-load of china, or drop a lighted lamp and scream "fire." Anything to break the thread of her father's thoughts and make him forget the terrible potatoes. But fate was against her.

"Oh, don't trouble, Prue!" the father cried, feeling in his waistcoat pocket. "I have some wax-lights, I think—Yes, here they are."

He produced them. Phosphorus fumed on his fingers in the gloom. Prudence felt that the end of all things was at hand.

"Here, hold this flambeau while I strike a light," he said. Sick with pain, dumb with terror, her clothes clinging to her body with perspiration, the girl obeyed.

Sish, sish, went the unfeeling little wax-light on the sandpaper. Sput, sput, went the big black wick of the bad-smelling candle-end. In ten seconds it flared up, cold and yellow, marking out every crack and cranny of the rough flagged floor to which Prudence bent her eyes in blank despair. The end of the world has come.

Shading the flame with his hand—it made his hand a claw of quivering blood—Inkersley began his descent. One foot was on the kitchen floor, the other on the topmost of the cellar steps, when—

Clang, clang, clang!—jangle, jangle, jangle!—the front door bell, dancing frantically upon its rusty spring about a yard above the heads of father and daughter, gave forth an unexpected and terrific peal.

Inkersley made a terse observation in some unknown tongue, and dropped the

candlestick, which jumped clanking down the cellar steps leaving the kitchen again in darkness. He saved himself from following it only by a wild clutch at the framework of the door.

"It is mother! It is the children!" screamed Prudence, snatched from the jaws of death. "It is Hamlet's ring! I know it of old!"

"So do I, confound him!" growled Inkersley. "He nearly killed me with it once before, and now he has nearly killed me with it again. Idiot that I am to be always meddling in what doesn't concern me. Pick up your potatoes for yourself!"

"Certainly, father dear; with pleasure," she answered dutifully; "only first we must go and let mother and the girls in—I wonder what can have brought them home—? Perhaps I had better lock this door. We don't want any more accidents, do we?"

She locked the door accordingly, and pocketed the key.

Yes, mother and the children had returned in charge of Mr. Wiggins. Prue's headache and the father's withdrawal had been succeeded by qualms of dispepsia in Hamlet—the effects of over-eating—and the storm that had been threatening all day seemed imminent. So home they had come.

And immediately they filled the house like a swarm of locusts.

XIX

Morning. Deceitful morning; sometimes rosy, more often grey, but always full of false encouragement. Morning, that opens a shutter to the desperate. Morning, when the drooping invalid inhales a breath of fresh life, and thinks he may recover. Morning, when the jilted lover who has mourned away his vigil feels that he yet has power to win, and begins to hope his sweetheart will relent before it is too late. Morning, when the bankrupt leaves brooding upon pistols and prussic acid, and has a premonition that the grand prize in the foreign lottery has fallen to his number. Morning, when the wretch under sentence of death thanks God that he has still another day to live, and persuades himself that a reprieve must come before to-morrow morning. Morning, that re-illuminates the day star of self-delusion in the firmament of possibilities, kindled a wintry glimmer in the soul of Prudence.

Of course there were the inevitable questions to be answered, and of course she had to lie. In the name of pity, why *will*

folks ply the suffering with interrogatories?

Are you better to-day, Prue my love? Oh yes, much better; quite well in fact. But how dreadfully pale you are; don't you feel pale? Yes, yes; you see I was really so very unwell yesterday. But how comes it that your poor eyes are so dark and hollow? Well, the truth is I slept badly. You look to me as though you had not been in bed at all? Really? well I had bad dreams, and that is much the same thing. Why did you wince when I embraced you, dear? My left arm is a little stiff—rheumatism I suppose; the house is so damp. You must let Dr. Dolling examine it; shall we send for him. Oh no, thanks; I should be afraid, ha, ha!

Save me from my friends!

At last she satisfied them all, from Mr. Inkersley to Hamlet. The next problem was how to satisfy herself; and sometimes the hardest critic in the world to satisfy is self-indulgent self. She struggled to call back the firmness she had once commanded. She strove to make believe that the late Miss Inkersley was still alive. "I will banish the whole pantomime from my thoughts," she determined; "I will and I will and I will. There is nothing in the cellar. I was ill, and I imagined it. It is true I have that key in my pocket, but I merely turned

it upon a fancy. And supposing anything *were* there, what then? If he is alive and hiding, let him go away as he came. If he is stretched dead at the foot of the steps, let him lie there. He killed himself. It is no affair of mine. I know nothing about it. I dismiss him from my mind."

But, as the Monitor within keeps whispering, you can't dismiss him from your body, can you Prue? What are those marks on your skin—those marks that ache? Just roll up your sleeve. Nay, you need not surely be ashamed? Your arm is as shapely as sculpture, as luminous as pearl. But how came those stains upon its whiteness, above the elbow, and on the inner side, the tender side? There are blotches, green and blue and yellow, turning brown, edged with fiery red—thumb marks! nail marks! deep and bloody and cruel! You do not dare to look at them. When you took your bath you kept your face turned over your right shoulder, and you dried that left arm with your eyes shut. Bad dreams? Yes. One nightmare gripped very tight. 'Twill be a month at least before its brand-mark fades away.

Oh, what a length of a day that was! The hours seemed ages, centuries, æons. She wore out most of them in the kitchen, helping to prepare for the party to take place

next night. Game and poultry had to be cooked; jellies, puddings, and other bright-hued abominations, had to be concocted. All the children pretended to give their aid. All got in the way. The younger ones pilfered sugar, candied peel, almonds and comfits, squabbled and informed on one another, and, in a word, behaved themselves scandalously. It was worse than a week of washing-days in sequence. Sea air and salt water had performed their functions grandly. Llandudno liberty had run to license unrestrained; law and order had been flung to the winds. Mrs. Inkersley preached harrowing sermons, in vain. The name of Uncle William had ceased to charm. His wondrous boyhood, his brilliant manhood, his noble life and heroic death, were pictured vividly but with no effect. Mildred, aged seventeen, misconducted herself in a manner so egregious that she was solemnly led before Prudence for judgment. A month ago the elder sister would have sent the younger to bed, or condemned her to bread and water, or ordered her to write out her Duty to her Neighbour five times. But what could she do now? Dared she administer Discipline with that key in her pocket, those blots on her arm, and God alone knew what in the cellar? She could only caress the child's flushed tearful cheeks, ponder enviously

upon her babyish innocence, and bid her be naughty no more.

The cellar; it kept rising up in her mind like a recrudescence of nausea. In the early afternoon a crisis occurred. Cooking brandy was requisitioned, and could nowhere be found. Strictly, it wasn't needed until next day, and Prudence—absently, vacantly—suggested that it should be sought for next day and no sooner. Such an arrangement (irrespective of other contingencies) would of course allow her time to procure another bottle. But twenty-five years' union with her husband had infected Mrs. Inkersley with his mania for fixing upon unexpected trifles and worrying them out at inordinate length. The object of concentration this afternoon was the bottle of brandy. She got it fairly on the brain. Operations were declared suspended, and the house was rummaged high and low. But brandy and bottle had alike disappeared.

They were about to abandon the quest in despair, when a bright idea occurred to Mrs. Inkersley. "I have it now!" she said victoriously. "It must be on the shelf above the cellar steps. Everything gets put in the wrong place when I am away." (As a matter of fact, disorder invariably coincided with her advent). "Come Prue, we will go and look there. Either it is there or it has

been stolen."

But the key—where was the key?

Everyone clustered around the cellar door; the mother, Prudence, the blondes, Hamlet, the two maid-servants. Everyone propounded the same conundrum: The key, where is the key? No one ventured an answer to the riddle. The key was burning a hole in somebody's thigh; somebody who stood with her back to the baffling door, clamouring louder than all the rest for the instrument wherewith to open it; somebody undergoing vivisection at the hands of nine females and a little boy, with a smile upon her lips. She was artistically guiding imagination from the idea of lock-smiths and carpenters to that of a fresh bottle of brandy, when Hamlet—imp of mischief!—intervened.

"It doesn't want no key nor any carpenters," he piped, slipping between his diplomatist sister and the door. "I'll bet sixpence I can do it!" He gave a dexterous jag at the old lock, and the door swung back. Instantly he disappeared into the opening, and ran whooping down the steps. All Prue's sinews went slack, like elastics exposed to the sun. She sank speechless upon a chair.

A sudden yell arose from the elphin down below. 'Twas the tongue of triumph, the shout of discovery. All forgot the missing brandy, and Prue's heart stood still. A

moment later Hamlet reappeared, waving aloft a cobwebby wide-awake hat. The nasty sweetness of pomatum filled the kitchen. "Look what I've found!" shrilled the terrible child. "I knocked my foot against it. I thought it was a dead rat."

Immediately the vivisectionists mustered round the hat. They swarmed upon it as flies swarm upon anything sticky. They took it to the window, and examined it minutely. Someone whose knees would scarce support her weight examined it most minutely and most wonderingly of all. It was almost new, though saturated with hair-oil. Prudence was just about to get the hat placed in charge of herself, when Hamlet—he was born to be a detective—turned down the leather lining of the crown. On the inside of that band were traced two letters in pen and ink; very fine, and very much clouded with oil. Prudence turned away, and resigned herself to doom.

"Initials!" palpitated Mrs. Inkersley. "Hamlet, give me the hat at once!"

Hamlet of course disobeyed. "Do you suppose I can't read?" he said indignantly.

The vivisectionists wrangled over the hat, and the initials, and who should decipher them, as though a whole cryptogram had lain hid in those two lonely characters. There seemed danger of the oily mystery being rent in pieces, and its secret lost for

ever, when Prudence interposed. Disgrace and ruin would be preferable to this agonizing suspense. Stretching over the tangled heads of her sisters, she snatched the flimsy helmet away, held it aloft out of reach, and read aloud its legend, "S. P."

She handed the hat triumphantly to her mother, who reread the perplexing letters, and held the fragrant object to her nose.

"Sweethearts!" she ejaculated, as though she had discovered them by the sense of smell. "Sweethearts!" She bent accusatory glances upon Cerulia the housemaid and Gwendolen the cook, who stood apart together, glum and defensive. Both servants loudly protested their innocence. Gwendolen couldn't see that S. P. stood for sweethearts any more than for salt pork or south pole. Cerulia begged to point out that other chaps besides servant girls' young men used sweet-oil for their hair. But the mistress wasn't convinced.

"We must search the cellar," she decreed. "The man may be hidden there. This comes of outside kitchens, and back-doors, and garden-walls, and public parks—This detestable old house! Prudence dear, will you descend first? my nerves are so delicate."

"Pooh, so far as that is concerned I am not afraid to go alone," said Prudence nonchalantly. "If the man were there—

whoever he may be—I don't suppose he would eat me."

They insisted upon a reconnaissance in force, however, and trooped in a posse down to Denmark Lodge's crypt. Prudence went first, holding a tallow candle. Mrs. Inkersley came last, carrying the damnatory hat.

The cellar had the nameless odour of a sepulchral vault. Spiders and cockroaches sped from under the feet of the intruders. The guttering dip cast earthquake shadows right and left. The walls were stacked with household lumber; empty barrels, empty bottles, empty packing cases, broken furniture. A superannuated harmonium rotted in one corner. A venerable eight-day clock was dropping to bits in another. A hall-lamp, long retired from business, dangled from a beam. Man buries the broken emblems of his common life—its songs, its lights, its hours—even as he inters the casket of life itself when broken. From the wreckage around her, what echoes of past years flashed back to Prudence! In childhood she had dreamed (what girl has not?) of a lover that should be. And lo, among the remnants of dead days she seeks him now! Alas, the bitter irony of fate! What shall she find? a hidden monster or a battered corpse?

They found nothing. The search-party

wandered round and round the cellar. They probed into every nook and corner. But the inspirer of panic was not. Prudence felt almost disappointed. If she had committed murder 'twere best that it should out. But nothing transpired. Vanished brandy and mysterious hat remained unsolved enigmas.

The master of the house could not be approached. He would listen to no human being that day, he had announced, on any mortal subject. He divided himself between his den in the basement and the schoolroom on the second floor. From the cupboards of his study he collected old letters and papers in hundredweights, and conveyed them laboriously to the interdicted room above. The rubbish should be burnt after the silver wedding, he declared. It ought to have been done long ago, but it was the natural tendency of mankind to accumulate useless matter ; a tendency which lay at the root, no doubt, of that avarice so general among the productive classes. Now the fifth lustrum of his connubial existence was closing, and he would open the sixth with a clean page. He was determined to set his house in order And so on.

"It is obviously dangerous," said Prue, returned to the kitchen, "for this thing to be left about." She took the hat from her

mother. "The children will be putting it on their heads." She dropped it carefully into the range, and drew the dampers out. "Some dirty person may have worn it."

The hat was thenceforth forgotten. The afternoon waned, and night drew on apace.

Night. Night, when the exhausted sufferer sinks back upon his couch, and prays that he may soon exchange it for the grave. Night, when the watcher crossed in love flings himself upon a bed that shall not yield him rest, to groan away desolate hours or weep in the taunting glory of delusive dreams. Night, when the broken speculator curses himself for having borne another day of degradation, and steels himself to desperate resolves. Time-serving night—night that draws soft velvet curtains round the fortunate,—that coils barbed wire round the broken and the outcast—night threatened somebody with leaden eye and dead damp hand.

Somebody withdrew to her bedroom, and examined something by the wan evening light. All day she had striven to ignore it, though it had gnawn unceasingly and twinges had shot through it at every movement. There was no delusion. The print of that brutal thumb was turning black and blacker. She pored upon it in stupified wonder. No one, surely, would give credence, even if she told the story of those stains. Her father, her mother, her sisters—would they ever

believe that anything bearing the semblance of man could have wrought upon a lady's person—upon the sacred person of Prue the immaculate—an outrage so shameful and so shocking? She could hardly believe it herself. He could not be a man. He must be gnome, ghoul, demon, incubus. She recalled Dr. Dolling, in the days gone by, setting her shattered limb with a tenderness that made suffering sweet. She figured the ogre of the garden-wall, lacerating her live tissues, gloating on her agony, feasting his eyes on the bravery that writhed but would not scream. And could the same God who created Alfred Dolling also be the Author of Vincent Foljambe?

And where was he? What had become of him? Whither had he vanished? Was he hiding in some hole or cranny of the hateful old house? Was he lurking in the musty summer-arbour or in the ruined greenhouse? Was he set in ambush at the corner of the drive? She feared to stir hand or foot. Every instant she expected that blubby face to confront her, that merciless paw to fall smarting on her arm, those pitiless nails to nip and wring her afresh. She found herself an utter coward.

The qualms of a bogey-scared child, the servility of a beaten spaniel, overtook her with the darkness. Had she met Foljambe

on the stairs, she would have fallen upon her knees and held out the other arm for desecration. A corpulent ruffian had acquired the regal dignity of a ghost, with a ghost's right divine to do whatever seems it fit.

At midnight she went to bed. The taint of pomatum and the pungence of burnt felt seemed to mingle with the closeness of the room, forming an atmospheric matrice for the play of fearful thoughts. She locked and double-locked the door. She bolted the window, and drew blind and curtains close, though the heat was stifling. There were eyes everywhere; bilious bloodshot eyes. There were thumbs in everything; cruel merciless thumbs. The touch of her own fingers, as she undressed herself, made her shiver and wince.

At first she fought against sleep. How dared she offer herself to oblivion, with those eyes and those talons all round her, and the demons of Dreamland on the prowl? But the gloom became populous with yet more horrible mimes, with wraiths of reality, malkins of men and women, döppelgangers of friend and foe. She sank into that strange lethargy of body and vigilance of brain which render the sufferer susceptible of waking dreams, and open the gates of mind to phantasmagoria. All the mummers of the past few weeks stalked in upon the

vasty stage of thought, and mouthed at her, and mocked her. They mustered in a sultry garden, full of dying trees, decaying summer-arbours, and splintered conservatories, and fortified by crumbling walls that vied with those of Babylon in height. She saw herself. She saw the late Miss Inkersley, a stately figure, cool, clean, spotless, dignified; without fear, without reproach; incapable of falsehood, nescient of deceit. She saw the new Prudence, strutting upon high heels, vested in fluffy gauze, exhaling artificial odours, babbling softness in an artificial voice; ready to giggle, ready to weep, ready, alas, to lie. Her father made another visitant; her father maundering about in his alpaca jacket; her father always getting in the way; moralizing among flower-pots, picking up cigar-ends, squirming, transformed and terrible, upon old green velvet sofas, holding tallow candles over gaping gulfs. Then the Man in Black joined the company, and danced about on long and bunioned feet, and shed the rankness of pomatum on all sides. Then Mrs. Inkersley appeared; Mrs. Inkersley, a moving mountain of furbelows and flounces; Mrs. Inkersley followed by six white-clad blondes with golden hair. The six fairies jiggled themselves into twenty-four ballet-girls, who pirouetted with marvellous rapidity around the mother, until they, in turn, split

up into a hundred snowy lambs. The flock stampeded about until it was smitten to a dazzling storm of fluff-balls, which broke into smaller and smaller fluff-balls, until at last they melted away. Finally, a little black figure darted whooping upon the scene; 'twas Hamlet Prince of Denmark, dressed as such. In one hand he waved a greasy wide-awake hat, in the other a supple swishing cane. With the rod of discipline he signalled to an attic window high aloft. The window burst open with a crash like thunder, and a bilious face leered out.

Prudence could endure no more. Leap-
ing from the bed, she plunged her face into the wash-basin, and dashed cold water recklessly over head and neck and bosom. She believed that she was going mad.

She was just about to lie down again, when a movement in some upper chamber of the house arrested her. It was a footfall; smothered yet heavy, stealthy yet unmistakable. The step rapidly approached. Stairs and handrail groaned beneath a weighty burden. This was the last straw of sufferance. Her wet locks stirred like reptiles on her scalp. She fell forward upon the bed insensible.

Next morning a second bottle of brandy was missing.

XX

Philosopher and pessimist that he was, Mr. Inkersley naturally felt great anxiety for the mental development of his only boy. Education, as the word is commonly understood, he counted a thing of nought. Prudence, as anyone else, could teach the lad to read and write and cipher; it mattered little if his pursuance of those elements was scanty and intermittent. The parent's duty to his son, and therefore to posterity, was to make him understand the absurdities of Common Sense and, conversely, the profundity of common things. The majority of people were mentally blind, he declared; and his debt to futurity, in the person of Hamlet, was to leave behind him one bearing his name, and like himself, capable of seeing beyond the material shell of facts. Birthdays, Christmas Days, Wedding Days, and other anniversaries, as they came round, were invariably accompanied by a special lecture to Hamlet, who always listened attentively, and afterwards begged some costly boon in compensation. The more patiently he listened, and the more

artfully he kept the ball of instruction rolling, the more he was likely to gain of the outer crust of foolishness as his reward. He had become an adept in this gentle art, and the parent swallowed the bait greedily. Philosophers were ever prey unto the carnal.

Half way down the garden, shaded by apple-trees, was a bench; and there, in mid afternoon on the last day of the month, and also of this history, Mr. Inkersley seated himself, to rest for a space from his labours, and to pour wisdom into the ear of Hamlet, who nestled by his side. Denmark Lodge was in full view.

"Mankind are homeless now-a-days," said Mr. Inkersley sadly, while his eyes fixed themselves in dreamy abstraction on the house, from whence the shrill laughter of the girls echoed now and again.

"Isn't that a home?" said Hamlet, with some indignation.

"Yes, it is one of the last. They grow fewer daily. People have no separate existence now. They live in rows and flats and crescents and blocks. They are known only by their number, like convicts. Man has become a cultivated weed, like that London Pride there. Once the farmer had his farm, the cotter his cot, the lord of the manor his manor-house. All were equally beautiful and cosy, and therefore

rich and poor did not quarrel as they do to-day. The world to-day is full of bitter bilious jealousy. In the real homes, men gradually collected round themselves the tools, the ornaments, the treasures of their life; and after many happy peaceful years, they left all to their children, perfect and entire, so that the owners scarcely seemed to die at all. As the race increased, more homes were begotten, slowly and lastingly; and there again generations lived and died, sheltered by the same old walls and roof. The very bricks were sacred. Every home, Hamlet, should be a temple with three high altars—its hearth, its table, and its paternal bed. Yonder place was built to be such."

"Mother doesn't like it."

"No; mother would rather have a house than a home. Mother would like to 'know everyone' and have no friends; and to do that one must live in a smart house and have no home."

"Mildred says our house is haunted."

"H'm; does she indeed?"

"Are there really haunted houses, father?"

"Well yes; a few. There are haunted houses, and there are haunted men; but both are disappearing. Soon there will be neither homes nor human beings. Men are fast turning into machines, and their houses into a kind of engine-sheds. People eat machine-

made food, and cover their nakedness with machine-made clothes, and live in machine-made hives, full of machine-made rubbish that they call furniture."

"But it's wrong, isn't it?"

"Decidedly wrong."

"Then why do they do it?"

"They can't help it now. Some day they will repent, and try to dig up the old happiness for ever dead. But it will be impossible. Man has forsaken nature, and nature is God. Man should be a thing of nature, and his home no less. The soul has gone out of man, and out of his home also."

"But houses aren't alive."

"Homes are. They are born, and they live and die, like human beings. In their youth they were pretty, because they were bright and fresh and strong, and had all their years before them. In their old age they have another kind of beauty. They grow rough and crooked and wrinkled. They are bearded with ivy and creeping plants; they have all their years behind them. Man's dwelling-place should be as much a part of himself as the shell on a snail's back; and so long as man followed nature his home followed him, and copied him, because following nature, he bore God's image. Look at that old mansion. It stands alone, as every in-

telligent being should. Its windows are its organs of sense, by means of which it sees and hears and smells. Its door is its mouth, where messages of good and ill have gone forth throughout its life, and everything it has consumed has entered in. It has its fires to heat it, just like the body of man, while its shafts and flues and ventilators give off waste matter, exactly as our lungs and pores do. Its gutters and channels, its lightning conductors and bell wires, and pipes for gas and water, resemble the works of our nervous and vascular systems. Its sewers and sinks and drains are simply the entrails of a living organism. Its furniture should make its human image perfect. The great clock in the hall is the little pulse that ticks away our lifetime. The library, with its shelves of books, is the wisdom and knowledge that every human being should possess. The piano in the parlour is the building's organ of melody; and the alarm bell (you see the mark there where it once hung, on that middle chimney) its tongue of terror. The ivy behind, and the big vine in front, are the hair of head and face. The gardens and park were once its robe of dignity, jewelled with fountains and statues and clipped yews. But Civilization has torn its skirts away, and left it degraded in its old age.

"It is a very old house, is it not?"

"Yes. It is becoming senile. Its timbers have lost their spring and turned brittle, like the gristle of an aged body. Its roof has settled on its rafters, so that it looks a bumpy bald head. The rain has eaten away the mortar from its bricks, and left its face scored and wrinkled. It is at the end of its life."

"But houses don't die?"

"Dear me, yes; of course they do! Some die suddenly, by accident. They are blown down, or blown up, or burnt to the ground. Others die of disease. They become damp and rotten. Their skin drops off, their roof leaks, their pipes burst, their windows of sense get out of gear; they go crazy, and have to be carted away. A very few—a very few indeed, die of old age."

"Will that one?"

"I don't think so."

"Puppa, can houses feel?"

"That is a hard question, my child. Old-fashioned people seem to think they can. They say that when misfortune is coming the clocks go wrong, the pictures fall from their pegs, the bells ring untouched, the furniture and woodwork make strange noises, the doors slam without wind, and the window-panes crack from no cause. An evil spirit seems to enter in. Without doubt, there are wicked houses. In the

Book of Leviticus we read of leprosy in buildings. Now on this point the wisdom of the moderns has confirmed the folly of the ancients. Seeds of sickness—that is to say seeds of sin—get into the chinks of floors and walls, and poison the inhabitants for no one knows how long afterwards. Sinful things have been thrown into wells, and the wells covered over to stagnate, and to destroy the inmates. Then there are all the unbidden guests: rats, mice, crickets, beetles, moths, spiders, flies—just like the evil thoughts that attack us against our will, and gnaw at our soul until it is riddled and honeycombed with sin. And then there are the birds and the butterflies that live outside the windows, and remind us of things fairer and more beautiful than ourselves; the mysterious swallows, that come from afar off, like man's loveliest hopes and dreams, and take their flight again to sunny lands where most of us will never find our way. There are holy houses too. They are mostly in the country, where sweet scents and sweet sounds always enter through the windows and tell of holy essences outside the house of life. Here, near the ghastly town, we breathe the blighting smoke of factories, and the loathsome dust of human detritation. That is why the very trees are black and dead. Civilization lives in towns;

and civilization is the decay of man and the abandonment of God."

"Is ours a good house or a naughty one?"

"It is not a good house, Hamlet, but it is a home. Brave old pile! Two hundred winters have whitened that roof, and two hundred summers have scorched it, and yet it stands as firm as ever. Every night it has gone to sleep like its occupants, and opened its eyes when they did with the waking day. How often have those windows been shrouded in mourning? How many brides, veiled in tulle and decked with orange blossoms, have passed through its gates? How many infants have been born and cradled there, and grown up to men and women within those walls? Human souls rejoiced or lamented; and their home rejoiced or lamented in sympathy. And where are they now? The dust has returned to the earth as it was, and the spirit to God who gave it."

"But why do *we* live here, father? Mother says we ought to live in a nice bright villa, like Mr Wiggins and Mr Pergamen have."

"We live here, my boy, because your Uncle William bought it. It belongs to him. Your grandfather, you know, was a manufacturer of cheap jewellery; so were all your ancestors, up to the time of Charles the First. We come of an aristocracy of sham-mongers. Your Uncle William got

everything into his own hands—he was very clever—but on his death all came back to me. I sold off the business and works, because they belonged to me by descent. But the other properties, including this old place, I dared not sell."

"Everyone says it's a nasty house."

"Who minds what Everyone says? Everybody, divided into units, comes to nobody. Everybody means ten people, a hundred people, a million people, each more stupid than the other. One carrot, multiplied by a thousand, means a cartload of carrots; and one stupid person, multiplied by a thousand, means a thousand times as much stupidity. Hamlet, I give you a solemn word of advice: when you are grown up, never take the smallest notice of what the majority say or think."

"What's the majority?"

"Most people; all people except a very few. They are wrong about everything."

"And aren't the few wrong too?"

"Of course not. Mankind is divided between the Majority, who are wrong, and the Minority, or a few, who are right."

"And which are we?"

"I belong to the minority—the very few."

"Do mother and Prue?"

"Certainly not."

"Nor Mr. Benedict, nor Dr. Dolling?"

"Certainly not."

"They're all wrong about everything?"

"Certainly."

"Who else is right besides you, puppa?"

"Well, I—really I can't call to mind any others just at this moment. There *have* been others, but unfortunately they are all dead."

"Then you're the only man alive that's right about everything?"

"H'm. I could hardly say that. I am one of the few who are right about most things."

"But how do you know you're right?"

"Because the majority are fools. This, Hamlet, is the most stupid age the earth has ever known, and consequently the most unhappy."

"Mr. Benedict says this is the happiest time that's ever been, 'cause everybody's got a Bible."

"Which Everybody never reads. Shakespeare for sixpence, the New Testament for a penny, and Everybody ignorant of both! People buy all books, and read nothing but a halfpenny newspaper. When the Grimville Reading Rooms were opened, I presented two thousand volumes—the cream of all literature. Nobody looks at them. Because they have collected all the best books in the world, the rate-payers persuade themselves that all wisdom and knowledge circulates in Grimville. The readers study the pictures in the *Graphic*, or the sporting

notes in the *Daily Wail*, or at best borrow some silly novel full of dukes and earls and bushrangers. The juice of the brains of ages sticks to the walls of the Reading Rooms; and for all the good it does there, it might as well be sticking to the dark side of the moon."

"Mr. Benedict says the board-school children of Grimville could teach the professors in the reign of Henry the Eighth."

"Then Mr. Benedict ought to be ashamed of himself. The stone-masons of the Middle Ages were superior to any architect living. The tomb-stone makers were great sculptors, and the sign-writers great artists; and sculptors and painters have both ceased to exist. The ballad-writers of old put our laureates and novelists and journalists to shame. Progress has produced nothing but greasy machinery for turning out waggon-loads of trash, carrying about waggon-loads of men and women with nothing in their heads, little in their hearts, and hands that have long lost all their magic."

"I love machines. When Mr. Benedict took us to the Industrial Exhibition he said that in the time of his grandfather such a thing was impossible."

"Happy grandfather! The wretched pigmies of to-day gather up the clockwork toys of east and west and fancy they have made them, just the same as Library

Committees gather up the books of all nations and think they gather up their wisdom. Why, my child, not one of those who exhibit the greasy curiosities you love could make even a small piece of it. An engineer, let us suppose, designs a tap—a copy of an older one, a little altered—another man, helped by others, models it; another with much assistance, moulds part of it; another lot of men make the screw; another lot the washers; and so on. Where is the cleverness? How does this compare with the common black-smith of the Dark Ages, who, with his own hands, forged gates and weather-vanes that were eternal works of art, such as no man living can rival? No, Hamlet, man's brain, like his body, grows more feeble continually, and his manual power has gone. The only hope of the world is the End of the World."

"I'm frightened!" said Hamlet, squeezing himself close against his father's side.

From the damp darkness of the old house burst forth a flood of melody; the song of a bird.

"You hear that?" said Mr. Inkersley.

"Yes; it's Prue's canary."

"That bird is exactly like the Majority of people to-day."

"Why?"

"It lives in a cage, and believes itself at

liberty. It hops from perch to perch, for hours, for days, for years. In the course of its life it will have hopped hundreds of miles; but it will have got no farther. It imagines itself travelling onward; but it is the same bird, in the same cage, all the while. And it sings a fine song all to itself."

"But people don't sing songs like that. They couldn't if they tried."

"Oh dear, yes, they do! They sing a song about Freedom and Progress and Enlightenment, and all kinds of myths. And meanwhile they are as ignorant as that poor deluded bird, and as tame."

"I like tame birds. Wee-wee sits on Prue's finger, and pecks it."

"Yes; and has no notion whatever of what Prue is. He thinks her a tree in a gale, or a volcano in eruption, or some other freak of nature. She feeds him, or he would die. It is just the same with man and God. God is all round us, everywhere; but we can't see Him, because he is too big. We live in our cage, and sing our endless song about Civilization and Science, and all that rubbish, and we get to think we are taking care of ourselves; and all the while God is giving us seed and sand and lumps of sugar to keep us alive."

"But all birds don't live in cages."

"Oh no; happily they don't. Those in cages are the civilized ones. Man has got

into a cage called Civilization. So long as he remembered the cage, and Who put him there, it didn't matter. But each laying hatched forgets more completely; and he grows more slim and sleek and helpless each generation, and his song about Progress and Enlightenment, and all that stuff, grows louder and more musical. Oblivious of his prison, he thinks himself free, and talks big. If you turned that poor little canary out of his cage, he would immediately perish. He could no more feed himself than civilized man could."

"Are all canaries in cages?"

"Certainly not. The wild canaries are shabby little mouse-coloured things, like sparrows; and they don't sing much having never been educated. They are free, and feed themselves, and build their own nests. Their songs are hymns to God—their only Master."

"How cruel to put them in cages!"

"Yes; but in the course of time they forget it. A canary in a cage, with its fine cultivated voice, is like a city clerk with a voice in the government of his country. Both are tame and helpless; and both imagine themselves free. The canary, as a matter of fact, is the more free of the two. His cage has, perhaps, a hundred bars. The cage of civilization has many thousands. Fresh wires are continually being added;

and whenever that happens the poor fools within sing their fine songs about Freedom and Progress. Every time the royal assent is given to a new act of parliament, another bar is soldered to the cage. They are so numerous already that we can scarcely see between them. And all the while we hop about inside, and think we are progressing, and really we have lost the power to fly."

"What is the use of canaries, father? Prue says that everything in the world has its special use."

"The tame canaries have no use whatever. They have no end or object in life. They sing loud, and fly badly; and their chickens sing louder, and fly worse. And so exactly is civilized man to-day. He sings his idiotic song about Progress and Enlightenment; and yet confesses that he has nothing to progress to except a vast progeny even more hopeless and decrepit than himself, nor any signs of enlightenment except the gloss on his black machine-made coat. The purpose of a bird's life is to fulfil the law of nature, which is the law of God. The purpose of a man's life is to fulfil the moral law, and so get back to God, Who taught him to choose between good and evil. Man, severed from his Creator, is the weakest, most cowardly, and most worthless of animals. To the selfish capacity of the wild beast, he adds a Divine

ingenuity stolen from the Lord he has forsaken. Where civilization is left without faith, man had better not have been born. There is no end in life but Self and its lusts."

"I'm glad I was born father."

"And so am I glad you were born, my pet."

"Why *was* I born?"

"In order that you might be good and happy, and make other people good and happy, and find God, and live with Him for ever, and know everything."

A call came from the garden-door, shrill and plaintive; "Herbert, Herbert, where-ever are you? Herbert, *do* come to tea!"

It was Mrs. Inkersley. She appeared in the doorway, discovered her husband, and beckoning, hailed him anew.

"Oh, there you are and Hamlet too! I do hope, Herbert, you haven't been filling the child's head with nonsense. You stir him up so, with your strange stories that he is afraid to go to sleep at night. *Please* come to tea! We have to put the leaves in the dining-room table directly."

"Puppa dear," whispered Hamlet hastily, "will you please buy me a little steam-engine—a real one, that goes by itself? I should so love to have one."

"Certainly, my pet," replied the father, "if we are spared till to-morrow. But come to tea now; your mother is getting excited."

XXI

The silver wedding feast, to which this narrative has looked forward, realized itself in nothing more ambitious than a cold supper. Its importance lay in its motives rather than in its magnitude. It was strictly a family gathering, though the presence of a few old old friends had been urgently bespoken. All the arrangements were the silver bridegroom's own, and consequently somewhat peculiar. He had a reputation to live up to, he declared. He had been elected mystic, mattoid, crank, and he would abide in those colours. Why should a man not have his own way in the commemoration of his own nuptials? Why should an independent thinker like himself knuckle under to the customs of a majority which stood condemned by its own absurdities? Thus he hectored and bluffed, and bluffing believed he argued.

He arrayed himself, however, in an ancient dress suit. It had not been worn for many years, and the coat was found to be badly moth-eaten behind. But then he need not turn his back on the company;

indeed, as his wife was careful to remind him, it would be exceedingly ill manners to do so.

The couple, accoutred for parade, met in the parlour some minutes before the hour notified to the guests. What magic lies in evening dress! They were astonished at the sight of one another—and abashed. They kissed with the sweet constraint of a newly-wed pair. The garb of state had blotted out the domesticity of all the winters past. Mrs. Inkersley was a sight to behold. The splendours of five-and-twenty bridal days, and the gift-jewels of all their anniversaries, appeared to be heaped upon her person. Necklace hustled necklace, bracelet jostled bracelet, ring eclipsed ring. She blazed. Her husband, in his rusty black (the front view, be it understood, was most dignified), afforded a pleasing contrast. His expression, moreover, was resigned and tranquil as it had not been for many a month. No wonder. Had he not set his house in order thoroughly? Had he not carried out all the banquet preparations to the minutest detail? And he alone knew how elaborate those preparations were.

The blondes and Hamlet rollicked into the room a giggling crowd. The girls, in clouds of mauve tulle, would have done honour to a transformation scene, the boy's

black velvet and pearl buttons supplying an artistic foil. Last, not least, moving with her old rigid grace, came Prudence, arrayed in pure white of the severest simplicity; her hair its sleekest, her manner its most classical. Her face was deathly pale, but placitude, resignation, rested upon it, as upon her father's. The splendour of her beauty was no longer a question even among her own kindred. Her sisters stood on tip-toe one by one, and saluted her with the solemn kiss of fealty.

Mr. Benedict was the first guest to arrive. Inkersley drew him apart.

"My dear Benedict," he said, "I am going to beg a boon of you."

"Say on," said the clergyman.

"They are sure to want you to propose my health. Now you are not to. If you get on your legs I shall leave the room. You are too good to be made a hypocrite."

"I am disappointed," said Mr. Benedict. "You deprive me of a right. I proposed your health on the former occasion. Your health, my dear Inkersley, your happiness, your long life—"

"Yes, yes, I know. You are an obstinate fellow; but I am another. I won't permit it. There will be one here really worthy of the office. His name is Samuel Pickrell."

"I don't know him."

"You lose nothing. But do as I ask. When the moment comes, force him to the work. Don't delay too long. He will sit between you and me."

"If he refuses?"

"He cannot."

"Well, well; you must have your wish, I suppose; but I am sorry."

Messrs. Pergamen and Wiggins here arrived together. Punctuality had been insisted on. Then came Dr. Dolling. He drew near to Prudence and stood beside her, timidly, pathetically. It had cost him a great struggle to present himself; but he divined at once that no word regarding his proposal and rejection had been breathed by the girl or her father. And now he and she stood once more side by side; each pregnant with unspeakable yearning; both resigned to perpetual estrangement. Such is fate.

Talking stiffly, in groups, everyone seemed to be waiting they knew not for whom or for what. Mr. Inkersley had advised his wife, at the last moment, of a probable fifth guest; and nine o'clock was chiming when the door-bell struck a tiny note ("A sure sign of a parting!" whispered Mrs. Inkersley to Doris). A moment later, a skimpy figure, emitting a rich flavour of pomatum, stood dancing within the parlour doorway. It

bowed and scraped inanely, smiled wrinkled grins of self-consciousness, and wrung clammy hands in an agony of nerves. "The Man in Black!" whispered all the children. "The Monster!" gasped Mrs. Inkersley. *sotto voce*. The hum of conversation ceased, and the Man in Black's embarrassment, witnessed by a tempest of smiles and bows, became the more disconcerting. After watching his last arrival some seconds with unconcealed disgust, Mr. Inkersley stalked across the room and took possession of him. Grasping his arm, exhibiting him as one might exhibit a tame chimpanzee, he said, "This is my old friend Mr. Pickrell. Now let us go in to supper."

The dining room table showed its fullest length. Wax tapers, rising in dozens from an ocean of purple dahlias, old silver, and cut crystal, made it glitter like a glacier. The lights of the chandelier shone through shades of puce-coloured taffetas silk, shedding a violet tinge over everything. The portrait of Uncle William had been made weirdly prominent. Masses of white chrysanthemums were piled below and above the frame, which was festooned with black *crépe*; and clusters of candles, burning upon the mantle-shelf beneath, recalled the altar of a chantry. Above the canvas, suspended by a purple ribbon, hung the wreath

of immortelles that had been deposited so mysteriously at the house. It had proved useful, as Mr. Inkersley had suggested.

Cerulia the housemaid, and Gwendolen the cook, were both in attendance, clad in charming new dresses, caps, and aprons; gifts of their master, *in memoriam*, as he put it. The feast began. Mr. Benedict had just said grace when the host discovered that he had forgotten his pocket handkerchief. He left the room, but returned almost immediately, flapping the handkerchief ostentatiously against his forehead. It was a clean linen handkerchief, and he had never been seen in company with anything but a silk bandana. Perhaps he was proud to show his linen handkerchief. Champagne began to flow at once and in abundance. Pickrell, on Inkersley's left, between him and Mr. Benedict, was physically extinguished and socially forgotten. Prudence and Dr. Dolling sat facing one another.

Free merriment prevailed. The decorations, with their dark augury, had meaning for father and firstborn alone. To the others they were fresh tokens of the host's good-natured crankiness; nothing more. All the dishes were cold; for the master had argued that delays, and coming and going of servants, utterly destroyed conviviality. A

love-feast, once begun, should be carried through without break; et cetera, et cetera. And results certainly justified his theory. The cold things were most tempting in such sultry weather, and he shone in the character of an admirable host. Those present—with three exceptions—ate heartily, drank sufficiently, and forgot the cares of life. Denmark Lodge had witnessed no such cheer from the day of its degradation to a villa residence.

The time for toasts and speeches arrived in due course. Mr. Benedict called out for attention, and Mr. Wiggins tapped his plate loudly with a knife. Glasses were filled to the brim, and the Man in Black, prompted by Inkersley and Benedict, rose awkwardly from his chair. Curiosity rivetted the regards of all upon Pickrell, who looked supremely miserable. He twisted his head about, swayed from side to side, and shuffled audibly with his feet. Nervousness played havoc with his h's whilst he spoke.

"My friends—ahem—I suppose I ought to say, Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, "a honour 'as been conferred upon me of which I feel myself unworthy. Still I am proud to comply with Mr. Inkersley's comm—I mean I am proud to propose Mr. Inkersley's health. I and the Man—ahem

—I and Mr. Inkersley are very old friends, and very dear friends, I might say, loving friends. My breth—I mean Ladies and gentlemen, there may be, in this—er—distinguished assemblage those who would seem better entitled to speak because they are outward friends. But, though I say it as shouldn't, I have been to this 'appy family an unknown friend; if I might be so bold as to say so, a kind of a—er—an angel unawares."

"Decidedly unawares," muttered Mr. Benedict aside.

"I and Mr. Inkersley know each other very well, though you mightn't think so. Oh yes, exceedingly well. We 'ave known each other almost all our lives, like brothers, like 'usband and wife, like—er—David and Jonathan. We've always 'ad much in common. I might almost say we've 'ad all things in common, like the brethren in the upper room. We 'ave mutually 'elped and supported each other, as Christians ought. There have been times when I could hardly—er—'ave lived without Mr. Inkersley, nor him without me. Now my dear—I mean ladies and gentlemen, I won't detain you. Mr. Inkersley is an 'appy man. The Lord 'as seen fit to bless him with corn and oil and wine. We have 'em all here to-night on this festive board—er—especially the

wine, he, he. Now we all 'ope, my friends, as the Lord will see fit to continue these blessings until—er—until—”

“To-morrow morning,” suggested Mr. Wiggins with a husky laugh.

“Er—I beg your pardon—what?” simpered Mr. Pickrell, leaning towards the estate agent, and pulling out his left ear like a piece of indiarubber. “I didn’t ketch what you said.”

“He said ‘to-morrow morning,’” explained Mr. Inkersley. “Proceed Pickrell. Time is brief.”

Mr. Pickrell became painfully confused. “Well—er—I 'ope, ladies and gentlemen,” he stammered, “as the Lord will continue 'is mercies towards this 'ouse until to-morrow morning. I think—er—I won’t say any more. I beg to propose the very good 'ealth of Mr. Inkersley and his kind lady, and all their little olive branches—and the big ones into the bargain, he, he.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Inkersley,” said the guests. “For-or they are jolly good fellows!” began Mr. Wiggins, in high glee, and the others followed on, dreadfully out of tune. In the tumult of tongues and glasses no one observed that the host handed an envelope to Mr. Pickrell, who conveyed it softly to his pocket.

Mr. Inkersley rose to reply, a strange ex-

ultant smile beaming from his features. He opened with the deliberation, the earnestness, the facile grace, of a speaker who verily has ought to impart, and experiences deep satisfaction in communicating it.

"This," he began calmly, "is indeed a sublime moment; and sublime moments come to us only at intervals of many years. What memories it conjures up of other moments scarcely less supreme. One in particular: when I took my dear wife to my heart, a quarter of a century ago to-day, I doubted not that, so doing, I had touched the summit of experience."

"Hear, hear," said everyone.

"Which shows," continued the orator, "how easily we can be deceived. Five-and-twenty summers have bloomed and faded. Five-and-twenty times the birds have built their nests, and the leaves of autumn have fallen. And, ah, how many budding hopes have dropped like autumn leaves upon the earth! Those of us who met together then are now much older; some of us are perhaps a little wiser; a few of us are much sadder; and some, still present to memory, have passed away for ever. Those sweet young faces," he indicated his children, "are all new upon life's stage; and as for me, at last, in truth, I find myself—this hour—this minute—at the climax of my course."

I have reached the equator of my years. A dark ocean moans behind, a pale mist hangs in front, and no stars are overhead."

"Yes, there's one!" piped Hamlet, distended with gorging, and getting restive, "I can see it through the blind!"

"Hush, hush!" said everyone.

"Dear wife, dear children, dear old friends," pursued the silver bridegroom, "I greet you all. I trust you all. There is no Judas in this feast, and I offer my affection to you *all*."

"And we to you!" they cried.

"I believe it; and I rejoice in your love, though I deserve it not. 'Tis sweet to be valued, even by mistake. We are comrades, shipmates. So far, we have sailed together on the ocean of years. Together we have reached the line, and now—"

"We're all going over it together!" roared Wiggins. "We won't go home till morning!"

—"And now—in a very short space—in—in a few minutes it may be, I shall have crossed the line, and passed into another zone."

"A mixed metaphor," murmured Mr. Benedict, shaking his head, "and a dangerous one."

"Not to tell you I esteem you, nor to hear you say the same of me, did I call you

here to-night. Perhaps it was just one of my eccentricities? I am thought eccentric, and this might seem the wildest prank of all. But no; not that. I wanted witnesses; and who so fit, gentlemen, to act in that capacity as you, whom I have known so long and trusted so implicitly? In a few moments I shall prove, to ocular demonstration, that I have never been eccentric. No, you have been mistaken, and I misunderstood. My philosophy is sound; the outward show of things in no way represents the substance underlying. My religion is catholic; the so-called superstitions of past ages are fundamentally correct, though modern crassness substitutes carpentering for medicine and bun-teas for faith. You are all in error, and I am going to make converts of—" he paused, and leaned back towards the door, as though listening. "In a few moments you will learn the secret of my soul"—Mr. Pickrell here became so violently affected as to attract the notice of all present. He appeared to have been stricken with St. Vitus' dance—"and in that secret you will rede the riddle of life and death and immor—"

He stopped short, and listened again. Then he turned to the palsied object on his left.

"Pickrell," he said, "do you hear anything?"

"Yes I do," chattered Pickrell, in livid terror, "I hear a pattering sound."

"Rain," said Pergamen consolingly.

"Rain," said Mr. Benedict; "the storm has been brewing all day."

"Rain," said they all.

An effulgence of exultation beamed from the eyes of Herbert Inkersley. "I really don't think it is rain," he said, with a kind of chuckle. "No, I should decidedly question the probability of its being rain. In fact, I go so far as to assure you that it is certainly *not* rain. *It is the demonstration beginning!*"

Pickrell bent his head over the table, turned scraggy arms around his neck and knotted long damp fingers behind; the nails were observed to be uncut and dirty. The feasters sat open-mouthed and dumb. Prudence so blanched that Dr. Dulling, opposite, could no longer, trace the line where the satin of her throat and the silk of her frock met. Immovable, and lily white, she seemed to him an alabaster image stolen from the tomb of a dead empress.

As though wishful of smothering some dreaded sound, Inkersley, in a very high mechanical voice, resumed his speech:

"Well, as I was saying—haw, h'm—the cosmogonic laws and the psycho-dynamical forces commingling, sporadically but indis-

solubly, and combining in operation, upon whatever principle, observable or occult, their indefinitely augmented potentiality, to bias, by direct or reflex action, the ebb and flow of psychical experience, regarded both in its individual, or atomic, and in its communal, or conglomerate, aspect—haw, h'm—the nous or sentience of the hypothetical unit being, in reality, but a particle detached from a corporate growth of inevitable experimental development, purely spontaneous in origin, the nomenclatory factors of appetite and volition playing no effectual part in a chaos of phenomena where all things happen of necessity—haw, h'm—the dogma of personal accountability, or ethical idealism, depones itself of intrinsic value in the trend and relative consummation of the anthropic evolvment vulgarly termed civilization—haw, h'm—the apparent option or desideration of the sentient unit being, of course, automatic, and its seeming product a spark from the Nirvana of passive experience into which itself will ultimately be reabsorbed—haw, h'm—such an eschatological theory——”

“What, what, what, what, *what?*” interrupted Wiggins. “Say, Inkersley old man, is this a joke, or has the fizz got to the wrong spot?”

“Hush!” said Dr. Dolling, in stern

command. "He must not be stopped; it is dangerous."

"On all systems of philosophy, then," resumed Inkersley, raising his voice to a shout, "from the Pythagorean to the Transcendental——"

Here Pickrell threw himself back in his chair, with a howl of terror, and sat goggling from the open door to the orator, and from the orator to the open door. Inkersley turned towards him meaningly, and that ineffable smile broke like moonlight from his lips and his eyes. "What?" he said, softly, coaxingly, "do you hear something, Pickrell?"

Pickrell again twisted his arms around his ears, and threw himself forward among the plates and glasses. Inkersley renewed his enquiry, in tones more soft and wheedling than before. "Come, come, what is it you hear, my dear Pickrell? Come, won't you tell me now?"

The Man in Black reared himself upon his hind legs, and smote his scraggy breast. "I hear footsteps!" he cried. "May God be merciful to me a sinner!"

"Ho! footsteps, eh?" tittered Inkersley, in ghastly fun. "What, you hear footsteps, do you? And so do I, he, he, he! And so do I, ho, ho, ho!"

And so did they all, and all sat dum-

founded. The silence of crowds is audible, and the hush that filled that glittering room sang and sobbed like electricity in the ears of its occupants; in the ears of the two combatants, fighting their weird duel; in the ears of the four guests, struck speechless; in the ears of the household, alert for some dire catastrophe; in the ears of the two maids, transfixed and gaping; in the ears of somebody asking God for death. Noone moved a finger. The fall of a pin could have been heard. A passer-by, peeping between the curtains, might have supposed himself the spectator of a *tableau vivant*.

"It's coming nearer!" burst out Pickrell at length—"NEARER!" The last word swelled into a woman's shriek.

"Yes, it is undoubtedly drawing nearer," assented Inkersley blandly. "It will soon be here!"

"It's a man coming downstairs," blurted Wiggins, caught by the infection of dread, yet bold through fulness of wine. "P'r'aps he wants a drink. Let's go and see."

He made a move as though to leave the room; but the action roused Pickrell from hypnosis to sudden energy. He leapt wildly to the door, slammed it to, and dashed his back against it.

"Stand back!" he screeched in cracked falsetto. "If anyone comes near——!" he

clawed the air with his dirty nails, like a wild cat at bay.

Again silence. With deep repugnance every eye scrutinized the thing squirming against the door. Inkersley, however, retained his bland demeanour. 'Twas a great operator exhibiting some pathological monstrosity; himself stale to the spectacle, but finding grim zest in unfolding its horrors to others.

There could be no doubt about it. Something was approaching from the upper chambers. It advanced with irregular tread, a blind man, a man drunk, a man groping his way in the dark. There were long pauses between the steps, and now and then a stumbling sound. Still it approached. Every minute it stamped louder and more close at hand. On, on it came. It reached the flight of stairs that led into the hall, and began the descent of that. The knees of the Man in Black gave way, and he sank, in a kneeling posture, to the floor. But his shoulders remained glued in agony against the door, and his ear strained towards its chink.

The general dread intensified; the on-lookers rose from their seats. Loud falls the heavy tramp. The warped old stairs groan beneath it. The rickety old balustrade gives audibly. At last the feet have reached the hall. They grit the rough stones of its pavement. The visitant is at the door.

Its proximity made indescribable the face

of Pickrell. Straining to look behind him, his eyes seemed pigeon's eggs bursting through mud-coloured leather. His mouth gaped so that the tongue inside could be seen, fluttering like a trapped bird. False upper teeth, dropped from their place, hung like a bone bracelet across the cavity. The facial muscles quivered, as those of guillotined criminals are said to quiver when irritated by a faradic battery.

The visitant is at the door—stationary upon the mat outside. Will it cease now? Will it return? Will it knock? Will it enter? What will happen?

A tremor thrilled the spine of every watcher. There is pressure on the door. Something fumbles at the handle, scratches on the wood. Something is fighting for admittance. In a last despairing effort, Pickrell rose up on his knees, and worked his shoulders frantically against the yielding barrier.

The pressure from without increased. A rigor shook the scarecrow crouched within. He strove to speak or scream. His tongue and jaw worked convulsively, but could shape no words. A low whining sound came from him—the whimpering of an injured dog. It was a pitiful spectacle.

Creak, crack! A heavy weight falls blank against the panels. With a thick gurgling sob, the Man in Black gave way, and sprawled forward, inert, upon the worn old

carpet. Open flew the door, admitting a cloud of white smoke, and over the rags of Pickrell, into the midst of the spectators, rolled a gross and mundane shape.

Dr. Dolling had edged his way to where Prudence stood, and he caught her as she fell. Mrs. Inkersley went off into hysterics, laughing and sobbing in the hands of the attendant maids. The blondes lifted up their voice in shrieks that covered all the gamut, whilst Hamlet sounded an alarm that resembled a fog-whistle in a stiff breeze. The smoke thinned rapidly in the draught of door and windows, and pillowed on the back of Pickrell, appeared a fat and liquorish face, smiling the idiotic smiles of drunkenness, dribbling stuff that stank of brandy from its bristled mouth.

"Why, it's Mr. Foljambe!" shrilled Doris.

"Mr. Foljambe!" chorussed all the beauties, going from shrieks of fear to shrieks of laughter.

"Foljambe!" shouted Inkersley. "Only Foljambe! Thank God, thank God!" In conformity with immemorial habit he drove his fingers through his hair.

"Oh, look, look! do look at father!" rang Hamlet's perforating treble. "Father's hair has turned white! This heat 'll be the death of him!"

It was true. The locks the hands of Inkers-

ley had lifted showed patches white as snow.

"But the man—! Pickrell!" cried Mr. Benedict—"he is being crushed to death!"

"Right, parson!" roared Wiggins. "What's fun to us is death to him! Come, lend a fist, and pull him out of bed!"

They kicked the drunken blubber from above, and raised a limp black reach-me-down from below. No sound. No movement. Awed voices offered eager suggestions:

"Open his collar!"

"Open the curtains!"

"Get cold water!"

"Get burnt feathers!"

"Get hot bricks!"

"Doctor, Dr. Dolling, quick! You're wanted!"

The doctor, after depositing Prudence tenderly upon the old green velvet sofa, strode towards the fallen reach-me-down. He jerked out its false teeth, and threw them in the corner. He tore away a paper collar, a ready-made tie, a detachable shirt front, a chest protector, a dirty flannel vest. Upon the little that remained he laid his hand.

"Further trouble is useless," he said quietly. "The man is dead."

"Dead!" cried Inkersley. "Pickrell dead! Thank God, thank God!"

Smoke began to thicken again. Pergamen detected it.

"Gentlemen!" he said, sniffing loudly. "Gentlemen, you appear not to observe the smell of burning in the air. It is my opinion that the house is on fire."

"The house is on fire!" cried everybody.

Wiggins dashed out into the hall.

"Great Scott!" he yelled, "the lawyer's right! The old shanty's on fire fast enough—and not insured! No matter—the site's worth more without the bricks and mortar! We'll have to be getting our hats!"

The last words were lost in a clap of thunder. The storm had broken. A blast of wind entered, and blew out nearly all the candles. It lashed around the room like an avenging spirit. It dashed the wreath from Uncle William's portrait, and made the heavy canvas flap against the wall. It whistled in the toothless mouth of the corpse, and stirred the white hairs on the head of the master. Then came the rain. What rain! The floodgates of heaven were opened. The spouts and gutters of the old house swelled to bubbling cataracts. Splashing puddles outside the windows sang a watery dirge over the reach-me-down that once was Pickrell, and an earthy churchyard odour entered in to quench the smell of its pomade. But whilst the rain and hail came crashing down upon the roof an ominous roaring rose within the walls.

XXII.

Of Denmark Lodge there remained next day scarce the remnants of a ruin. Even green-house and summer-arbour had disappeared. The storm annihilated them.

In the pocket of the reach-me-down that once was Pickrell were found bank notes to the value of £500, together with a line in Mr. Inkersley's handwriting stating that no farther sum would be paid. The money was faithfully handed to the widow.

On the person of Foljambe they discovered a letter from Prudence. It was "that blamed insulting letter" in vengeance whereof he had maltreated her so barbarously. "I hate you," it said, "with unutterable loathing. I burn in shame and grief to think that your lips have polluted mine. I am punished for my folly and deceit, for I have this day rejected one who would have made my whole life happy. . . . Marry *you*! Why the mere touch of your hand is contamination!"

The state of her arm proved the truth of her words. The parents wept, and the children wailed, over those cruel stains; but

Dr. Dolling treated the case with admirable skill and devotion. He waited professionally upon Miss Inkersley twice a day for six months. At the close of that period he declared the cure complete, but nevertheless declined firmly to relinquish his patient. Lest after-effects should supervene he took her permanently to his own keeping.

She makes the doctor a matchless wife. She is everything that is sweet and lovable in woman. The hardness, the primness, of spinster years have melted away for ever. The coquetry, the kittenism, the soft self-blandishment, of the flirtation-trance have vanished like a vision of the night. Mrs. Dolling looks back upon those days as upon some strange fit of mental sickness—and so, in fact, they were.

Mr. Inkersley has got rid of all his delusions. He is a white-haired optimist; an obedient patient of Dr. Dolling, and a faithful parishioner of Mr. Benedict. He dispenses charity from a lovely "modern residence."

Mrs. Inkersley is sweeter, softer, more poetical than ever. The blondes grow larger, lovelier, rosier daily. Doris is engaged to Mr. Benedict's senior curate. Hamlet is doing well at school.

Foljambe sells brass wedding rings and penny looking-glasses outside the Grimville market-hall.

THE END.







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